

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 started listing things that we can know for certain about Christ's second coming. The first thing we know for sure is that we *cannot* know when Christ will come. The second thing we know for sure is that Christ's second coming will be visible to everyone. And the third thing is that all believers will be with him in glory. The fourth and last thing we listed last week, was that we, along with God, will be victorious over all of his and our enemies on that day. Dr. Spencer, how would you like to begin today?

Dr. Spencer: By reminding our listeners that this list of things we can know for sure, is loosely based on J.I. Packer's book *Concise Theology*.¹ And then I want to move on to the fifth thing we can know for sure, which is that the dead will be raised and all people will be judged.

In John 5:27-29 Jesus said that the Father has given him, "authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. 'Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.'"²

Marc Roby: Now, that again sounds like judgment based on works, just like a few verses we looked at last week.

Dr. Spencer: It does sound that way, and so we need to again use Scripture to interpret Scripture and realize that this is not contradicting the clear biblical teaching that we are justified by grace alone through faith alone. But it is, rather, making the point that everyone who is truly saved will walk in obedience and have good works. These works are not meritorious, but without them our claim to having been saved is simply not true. In addition, we know that there are different levels of reward in heaven and of punishment in hell and our works will be used in that judgment.

The bottom line is that, while we have to stand firmly on the reformation doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone, we have to be equally careful not to drive off into the all-to-common ditch of modern evangelicalism and say that our good works don't matter.

Marc Roby: Yes, we have discussed the need for good works as proof that we have been justified several times in these podcasts, but it is such a common heresy that it is well worth making the point again; you simply cannot be saved without any good works.

Dr. Spencer: That's a very important point to emphasize. Let me read a quote from the great 20th-century theologian John Murray. He wrote that "Judgment according to works does not contravene salvation by grace. Salvation is by grace through faith. But the faith that is saving

¹ J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, Tyndale House Pub., 1993, pp 251-252

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bears fruit in good works, and faith without works is dead. Good works are therefore the index to a state of salvation.”³

But now I would like to finish the list of things that we can know for certain about Christ’s second coming.

Marc Roby: Very well. What else can you know for certain?

Dr. Spencer: Well, the sixth thing we can know for sure is that there will be a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.

Marc Roby: And Peter told us exactly that. In 2 Peter 3:13, immediately after telling us about the day of the Lord and that this world would be destroyed by fire, Peter wrote, “But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.”

Dr. Spencer: We are not given much detail about the new heaven and new earth, but we know that they will be glorious. In Romans 8:19-21 the apostle Paul wrote, “The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.”

Marc Roby: Those verses are a bit difficult for many to understand I suspect.

Dr. Spencer: And there are some differences of opinion about how to interpret these verses,⁴ but none of the differences affect what is important for our purposes today. When Paul speaks about “the creation” in these verses, he is speaking about the non-rational creation as explained in detail by John Murray.⁵ In other words, the expression “the creation” in these verses does *not* include man, or angels, or demons. It does include animals and the inanimate creation, which is, I think, the way most people naturally read it in context anyway. It is obviously then a personification when Paul says that the creation *waits in eager expectation*.

Marc Roby: I think that is all reasonably obvious. And by speaking about the sons of God to be revealed, I assume that Paul is speaking about God’s gathering in all of the elect on the last day.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I think that is right. Prior to that time, only God knows for certain who belongs to the true church, which we have previously called the invisible church because it is not known for certain by us. The church as *we* see it, which we have previously called the visible church, includes some people who profess to be Christians, but are not. John Murray remarks that “not until they are all glorified together with Christ will the body of Christ be *manifested* in its integrity and unity”⁶ and he cites Colossians 3:3-4, wherein Paul wrote, “For you died, and your

³ John Murray, *Collected Writings*, Vol. II, Banner of Truth Trust, 1977, Vol. 2, pg. 416

⁴ e.g., see J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997, pg. 301

⁵ *Ibid*, pp 301-302

⁶ *Ibid*, pg. 303

life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”

Marc Roby: Very well. What does Paul mean when he wrote that “the creation was subjected to frustration”?

Dr. Spencer: Well, as Murray points out, Paul certainly has in mind Genesis 3:17-18, where God, after the fall, told Adam, “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’ Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field.” But this is not all that Paul had in mind. Murray points out that, in context, it is clear Paul is referring to all of the non-rational creation and Murray says, I think correctly, that “we are not able to understand the implications for creation as a whole.”⁷

Marc Roby: We may not be able to understand *all* of the implications, but, at the very least, this tells us that God’s curse on the fruitfulness of the soil will be removed when Christ returns and God brings about the new earth.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I think that much is certain. I also think it means there will be some fundamental changes to the physical laws of our universe. For example, I personally don’t see how the second law of thermodynamics, which is one of the most fundamental laws we have, could remain in effect in a perfect, eternal world. That law is necessary for life as we know it, but it also describes why the universe will eventually run out of useful energy. It is sometimes called the “arrow of time” and it leads to the conclusion that if this universe were to continue evolving according to natural law, it would die. It would end in a uniform state of very low temperature matter incapable of sustaining any kind of life. This is often called the heat death of the universe.

Marc Roby: Well, I doubt that very many of our listeners think about such things.

Dr. Spencer: I’m quite sure you’re right about that. And I mention my speculation only to make the point that there will be some very significant differences between the new earth and our existing earth. We aren’t told what they will be, and we certainly couldn’t understand all of them anyway. But there will be some big differences. And there will also, I’m sure, be great continuity. We will not be strangers there. But, rather than focus on what we *don’t* know for certain, the certainty is that there will be a new world and it will be very different from what we experience now.

Marc Roby: And it will be glorious and wonderful beyond our wildest imagination! Is there anything else that we can be certain of?

Dr. Spencer: Well, that’s all I want to list for now. But I want to briefly go back to the idea that we know this new heaven and new earth will be the home of righteousness, which tells us that only those people whom God has chosen to save and make perfect will be there. Hell is a very

⁷ Ibid

different place. We know it will be eternal and we know it will be terrible, but we don't know other details. The Bible describes it with terrifying symbolic and metaphorical language.

Marc Roby: We certainly know that we don't want to be there.

Dr. Spencer: That is certain, yes. And we shouldn't want anyone else to be there either, which should motivate us to evangelism.

Marc Roby: What else would you like to cover about the end times?

Dr. Spencer: I would like to deal briefly with what we are told in the Book of Revelation.

Marc Roby: Okay. Now that is a difficult topic.

Dr. Spencer: And I am only going to give a very brief treatment of it, but we must discuss it for two reasons: first, it is a book about which many Christians disagree and yet many Christians spend an inordinately large amount of time and energy trying to figure out, often to their detriment.

Marc Roby: Why do you say it is to their detriment?

Dr. Spencer: Because they are interested in it for the wrong reasons. They may not be trying to determine the *exact* day or time that Christ will return, but they are still trying to match current world events with the imagery in the book so that they will know if Christ is coming in the immediate future. But, as we noted last week, the first thing we can know for certain about Christ's second coming is that we *cannot* know when it will occur. Therefore, we should not spend any time trying to figure that out. We should, rather, focus on being ready at any time for his second coming. But many look at the Book of Revelation to try and satisfy their curiosity about future events rather to find out how God wants them to live in this present evil age. As a result, they often end up overemphasizing certain aspects of this book and underemphasizing the rest of the Bible. Which means that they are missing the main purpose of this book and, indeed, of all of Scripture.

Marc Roby: Very well, what is the second reason it is important for us to discuss the Book of Revelation in the context of these podcasts?

Dr. Spencer: Well, the second, and most important, reason for us to look at the book is that it is a part of God's Word. And we are told in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 that "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." The Bible was written to instruct us in what we must believe and how we must live. That is why Paul told Timothy, in 1 Timothy 4:16 to "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers."

Marc Roby: So, both how we live and what we believe – in other words, our life and doctrine – are critical for our salvation and for our being useful in leading others to Christ. With that warning about the proper use of the Book of Revelation in mind, what do you want to say about it?

Dr. Spencer: Well, given this truth, that the Book of Revelation, along with the rest of the Bible, is given to us *so that* we may be thoroughly equipped for every good work as Paul wrote, we must study it with that purpose in mind. Therefore, the first point I want to make is to explicitly state our goal in light of this warning. In other words, I want to say clearly that as we study the Book of Revelation, we should be asking God to show us what he wants us to learn about how to do the work he has assigned to us here and now.

Marc Roby: In other words, how does it affect our day-to-day lives. And how do we go about that?

Dr. Spencer: Well, we first have to spend some time looking at how to interpret the book. We discussed the science of hermeneutics in some detail way back in Sessions 39 through 47. But there are some things that we should say about interpreting this book in particular. The book begins by saying, “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place.” (Revelation 1:1) The Greek word translated as “revelation” is ἀποκάλυψις (apokalupsis), from which we get our word apocalypse. So, this first sentence tells us that the book is a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Marc Roby: And yet, in the King James Version of the Bible that book is entitled The Revelation of St. John the Divine.

Dr. Spencer: And that’s because John was the author of the book. But the revelation is *about* Jesus Christ, which is a very important point. As Joel Beeke notes in his commentary on Revelation, “This vision is about Jesus Christ, not the pope, Adolf Hitler, Napoleon Bonaparte, Saddam Hussein, or any other person in world history. . . . Because Revelation is not primarily about world events or world personalities, we must take care not to read them into the book, rather, we are to look at them in the light of the book.”⁸

Marc Roby: That is a very different perspective than you see in many of things written about the Book of Revelation. But it is obviously true in light of what the book itself tells us.

Dr. Spencer: Yes it is, and it is very important. And getting back to the first verse of the book, it says that God gave this revelation “to show his servants what must soon take place.” Beeke points out that this could also be translated as “things which must soon begin to happen.” And notes that “This phrase is the key to understanding the Book of Revelation: Jesus Christ wants to show us things that must shortly come to pass.”⁹ But there are different ways of interpreting that phrase. It may refer to events that occurred at the time of writing, or it may refer to events far in the future.

Marc Roby: But, as we have emphasized, in either case, we should live in obedient expectation now.

⁸ J. Beeke, *Revelation*, Reformation Heritage Books, 2016, pg. 5

⁹ *Ibid*, pg. 6

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we should. Beeke points out that there have been, historically, five main ways of interpreting this book.¹⁰ The first approach is called the preterist approach. The word comes from the Latin and refers to events which are already past. In this view, Revelation is seen as referring to events that occurred during the life of the apostle John, or very shortly thereafter, with the exception, of course, of the last two chapters, 21 and 22, which virtually everyone agrees clearly refer to the new heaven and new earth, which are obviously not here yet.

Marc Roby: Alright. What is the second approach?

Dr. Spencer: It is called the historical approach. This was the view of most of the reformers and, to quote Beeke, it “sees the Book of Revelation as a symbolic representation of the panorama of church history”¹¹.

Marc Roby: Well, that view seems to surely be correct at least to some degree. We read in Revelation Chapter Twelve about the dragon, who is obviously the devil, and a woman, and in Revelation 12:17 we are told that “the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring—those who obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.” Well, that is clearly making a statement about Satan’s opposition to the church in the entire New Testament age.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. And Beeke says, I think reasonably, that the woman represents “the church under the law, waiting for the birth of the Messiah.”¹² In the chapter, we then see the birth of the Messiah and because the devil is unable to destroy him, we get to the verse you quoted, which explicitly tells us that Satan attacks the church instead.

But before we get into any more details, I want to finish looking at the five approaches to interpreting this book.

Marc Roby: But unfortunately, we are out of time for today, so we’ll have to pick this up again next time. Let me remind our listeners that they can send questions or comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We enjoy hearing from you.

¹⁰ Ibid, pp 6-9

¹¹ Ibid, pg. 7

¹² Ibid, pg. 341