

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 to look at the book of Revelation. Dr. Spencer, you noted that there have, historically, been five main ways of interpreting this book. The first approach is called the preterist approach, which assumes that the book describes events that happened during the life of the apostle John or very shortly thereafter. The second approach is called the historical approach and assumes that the book presents us with a panorama of church history. How would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: By first reminding our listeners that in all of these approaches it is recognized that the last two chapters of the book refer to the new heaven and the new earth, which are, obviously, yet to come. Also, by way of reviewing the main importance of the book, let me read Revelation 1:3, in which John wrote, “Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.”¹

We see clearly that we are blessed *if* we take to heart what is written; in other words, if we obey it. And we are told the reason; the time is near. As we have said several times, we can’t know the exact time Jesus will return, but we are to live in the obedience of faith so that we will be ready whenever he returns.

Marc Roby: That’s an important reminder. But are we now ready to move on to the third approach used in interpreting the book of Revelation?

Dr. Spencer: Yes. According to Joel Beeke, whose commentary we have been using², the third approach is called the futurist approach and it was the most common view of evangelicals in the early 20th century. As the name implies, this approach assumes that the events in Chapters 4 through 22 of the book of Revelation all take place in the future, either shortly before or coincident with Christ’s return.

Marc Roby: Alright. What is the fourth approach used?

Dr. Spencer: The fourth approach is called the idealist approach. This view assumes that the events presented in the book of Revelation are pictures of grand truths that are repeated over and over again in the history of the church.

Marc Roby: And, if that is the correct view, it certainly would explain why symbolic language is used. It can represent a situation that repeats many times with differing details.

Dr. Spencer: That’s true, it would explain that. And the fifth approach is the eclectic approach, which, as the name implies, assumes that all four of these approaches are correct to some extent.

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² Joel Beeke, *Revelation*, Reformation Heritage Books, 2016

In other words, there are events in the book which took place around the time of its writing, there are others that are yet to be fulfilled, there are some which are repeatedly fulfilled in the history of the church and there is a sense in which the whole sweep of church history is covered.

Marc Roby: The eclectic approach sounds good, but then it requires us to identify which elements are which as we go through the book.

Dr. Spencer: That's true, but I think it is clearly the right approach to take. It makes no dogmatic assumption about the entirety of the book. And this is the approach that Beeke uses in his commentary.

Marc Roby: Very well. What else do you want to say about how we should interpret the book of Revelation?

Dr. Spencer: I would like to point out that many, including Beeke, think that the book offers parallel views of church history. This emphasizes the idealist approach, but does not use it exclusively. Beeke identifies seven parallel accounts of church history in the book. I don't want to go through these, but I encourage our listeners, as they read the book, to not view it as a linear presentation of any one period of history.

Marc Roby: Yes, that would seem wise given the highly symbolic nature of the book.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. And I think Beeke correctly identifies the main theme of the book. He wrote that "The great theme of Revelation is the victory of Christ and His church over the old serpent, his helpers, and all the kingdoms of this world."³ And he says that the book's purpose is "to inspire, comfort, and encourage God's people in the church in every era to press on in the face of persecution and amidst all our struggles, knowing we are on the winning side in this anti-Christian world."⁴

Marc Roby: Those statements immediately remind me of 1 John 5:19, where the apostle wrote that "We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one." There is a natural animosity between God's children and the world.

Dr. Spencer: And that animosity goes back to the fall. In pronouncing his curse after the fall, we read in Genesis 3:15 that God told the devil, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

The devil hates God and God's people and, as Christ told us in John 10:10, he comes only to steal, kill and destroy. But we are God's children and we know for certain that God wins in the end. In fact, he has *already* won. There is no doubt about the outcome of this conflict. God allows Satan to continue to oppose his church for a time only because this fulfills God's purposes.

³ Ibid, pg. 10

⁴ Ibid

Marc Roby: Which leads to an obvious question. Why would God allow this opposition to continue?

Dr. Spencer: Well, we aren't told all of the reasons why God wants his children to go through the trials and struggles caused by sin, but we are given some answers to the question. We must remember that God is preparing us for eternity in his presence. He is transforming us and conforming us to the image of Christ. And Christ himself was made perfect through suffering. We are told in Hebrews 5:8-9 that "Although he," referring to Jesus Christ, "was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" Now, if suffering was good for Jesus, we certainly should not expect to be exempt.

Marc Roby: That verse is sometimes confusing to people. We should probably emphasize the fact that it does not imply that Jesus Christ was ever anything but perfect.

Dr. Spencer: No, it doesn't imply that at all. The Greek word that is translated as *made perfect* is a form of the verb τελειόω (teleioō), which means to complete, or bring to an end, or to finish something.⁵ Jesus never sinned and had no faults, but in his humanity he was required to be obedient in progressively more and more difficult situations, culminating, of course, in his crucifixion. In that sense he was made perfect. And, in the same way, God uses trials to perfect us.

Marc Roby: That immediately makes me think of Romans 5:3-5, where Paul wrote that "we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope."

Dr. Spencer: It is a fact that we don't like, but trials have a way of driving out many faults. For example, laziness, selfishness, focus on the pleasures and joys of this life – all of these have a tendency to disappear when we endure trials. Trouble has a way of focusing our attention on what is important and driving us to God. Proverbs 17:3 tells us, "The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tests the heart." Now, you purify metals like gold and silver by heating them in a furnace until they become liquid. The impurities then float to the surface as dross that can be skimmed off. In the same way, troubles bring our impurities to the surface where they can be dealt with. In Isaiah 48:10 God said, "See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction."

Marc Roby: No one likes suffering, but it is clear that God can use it to expose and drive out sin.

Dr. Spencer: And also to drive us to himself. After describing some of the hardships that God put him through, the apostle Paul wrote, in 2 Corinthians 1:9, "Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead." Suffering in this life causes us to lift our eyes up to God and to anticipate the next life.

⁵ W. Bauer, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd Ed., Revised and augmented by F.W. Gingrich and F. Danker, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979, pg. 809

But I think we've wandered off topic a bit here, so let's get back to the book of Revelation.

Marc Roby: Alright. We discussed how to interpret the book and what the main theme is and what the practical purpose of the book is. What else would you like to say?

Dr. Spencer: I want to briefly mention the different views taken with regard to the millennium, which refers to a thousand-year period of time in which Christ rules on earth.

Marc Roby: Although few would say that the period has to be one thousand years. Most people understand this to refer to a long period of time.

Dr. Spencer: That's true. And the millennium is only explicitly mentioned in Chapter 20 of Revelation. In Verses 1 and 2 John wrote, "And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years." We are then told of Christ reigning in this period and of Satan being released briefly at the end of this time before being finally and utterly defeated and thrown into the lake of burning sulfur.

Marc Roby: This is a difficult chapter to understand.

Dr. Spencer: I agree, and I'm not going to attempt to interpret it line by line. I just want to make a few general comments and then I'll leave it to our listeners to read commentaries, like the one we have referenced by Beeke, and make up their own minds.

There have been three different major views over the centuries on how to understand this millennium. The first is called premillennialism.

Marc Roby: And the prefix *pre* in that word indicates that this view assumes that Christ returns *prior* to the millennium.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And this is probably the majority view among evangelical Christians today. As I noted when discussing the different views of how to interpret the book of Revelation, this view typically goes along with viewing most of Revelation as describing events that are to occur in the future. There are different flavors of this view depending on whether Christ will return prior to a period of severe trouble called the great tribulation, or after the great tribulation.

Marc Roby: And that period called the great tribulation is mentioned in Matthew 24:21, where in the King James Version we read that Jesus said, "For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be."

Dr. Spencer: That's correct. And I don't want to get into the different views on this topic, I would refer interested listeners to the excellent presentation of the different millennial views given by Wayne Grudem in his *Systematic Theology*.⁶

Marc Roby: Alright, what then is the second major view of the millennium?

⁶ W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, see Chapter 55

Dr. Spencer: It is called postmillennialism and, as the prefix *post* implies, it assumes that Christ will return at the end of the millennium. This view takes a very optimistic view of the future history of mankind. It assumes that Christians will be so successful in evangelism that at some future time the world will almost be completely Christian and will enjoy a time of increasing righteousness and peace prior to Christ's return.

Marc Roby: That is very optimistic, and I certainly would enjoy living to see such a time. But finally, what is the third view?

Dr. Spencer: It is called amillennialism, meaning that in this view there is no future millennium at all, rather, this view states that the millennium refers to the entire period of time inaugurated with Christ's first coming and ultimately concluding with his second coming, the final judgment and the creation of the new heavens and the new earth. This is the majority position among reformed believers.

Marc Roby: And to which of these views do you subscribe?

Dr. Spencer: I will have to say that I hold a slight preference for the classic post-tribulation, premillennial view, which is the one supported by Wayne Grudem. But I also find some aspects of the amillennial view to be worthy of consideration; and that is the view defended by Joel Beeke. But, and this is the most important point I want to make with regard to the millennium, your particular view of the millennium is *not* an essential element of true biblical Christianity. You can be born again and walking in faithful obedience to Jesus Christ and hold different views with regard to the millennium.

Marc Roby: But when you say that, aren't you, in essence, saying that the millennium isn't important?

Dr. Spencer: Oh, not at all. It is in the Word of God and so it is, therefore, important. But not everything in the word of God is of equal importance, nor is everything in the Word of God of equal clarity. There most definitely is a blessing to be obtained by studying what God's Word says about the end times, even if we don't all agree on the details and even if we don't personally come to a firm conclusion as to what we think will happen in detail. The danger is in getting so caught up in the details of the end times that we neglect the more important aspects of God's Word.

Marc Roby: And what are the more important aspects with regard to the end times?

Dr. Spencer: Well, you could certainly put this in different ways, but I would say that there are two aspects of the end times that are of critical importance for a Christian. And we have already mentioned both of them.

Marc Roby: And what is the first?

Dr. Spencer: That God wins. We may not all be premillennialists, or amillennialists or postmillennialists, but we should all be panmillennialists – meaning that we should believe it will all pan out in the end. God is sovereign and all that he has ordained will come to pass. And that

should give us great hope and courage. Jesus Christ has already won the victory and if we persevere in following him, we will receive a crown of glory and join him in eternal victory.

Marc Roby: And we should add that all who have been born again *will* be enabled by God to persevere to the end. We don't persevere by our own strength, but by his. In John 10:28-29 Jesus, in speaking about his followers, said, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand."

Dr. Spencer: That is very true. And because God wins in the end, we must make every effort to make our calling and election sure and to lead others to Christ. There is an eternal heaven and there is an eternal hell. They are the two most important realities. And the purpose of this life is to come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Nothing else comes anywhere close in importance. Not the exact nature of the millennium, not the issue of abortion, not evolution, not the age of the earth, nothing. Christians must not allow themselves to be sidetracked from the fundamental mission.

Marc Roby: Very well. And what is the second critical thing for believers to know about the end times?

Dr. Spencer: That we are to live all of life in light of the end. We are to continually walk in the obedience of faith and with the realization that Jesus could come at any moment, or we could be taken home at any moment. That is the ethical demand that a consideration of the end times places upon us and it was clearly, as we have seen, the emphasis given by Jesus and the writers of the New Testament.

Finally, I'd like to quote the final paragraph of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Chapter 33, Paragraph 3; "As Christ would have us to be certainly persuaded that there shall be a day of judgment, both to deter all men from sin; and for the greater consolation of the godly in their adversity: so will he have that day unknown to men, that they may shake off all carnal security, and be always watchful, because they know not at what hour the Lord will come; and may be ever prepared to say, Come Lord Jesus, come quickly, Amen."

Marc Roby: Very well then. Are we done with the topic of eschatology?

Dr. Spencer: We are. And in our next session I want to wrap up our study of the six loci of reformed theology.

Marc Roby: I look forward to that. But now, let me remind our listeners that they can send questions or comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org, and we'll do our best to answer.