

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology by examining a new topic today—the nature of true saving faith in Jesus Christ.

Dr. Spencer, our listeners might be surprised by the fact that we are not continuing our examination of extra-biblical evidence to corroborate the Bible, why are we stopping that series?

Dr. Spencer: We aren't stopping, only pausing for a bit. I want to shift gears for a short time to restore some balance. I do want to present a reasonable summary of the evidence to corroborate the Bible, and the engineer in me would like to complete that topic before moving on, but we have already done five podcasts in a row on it and there is a danger of over-emphasizing its importance.

Marc Roby: But, of course, it *is* important.

Dr. Spencer: Oh, of course it is, and we will return it. But, evidence that supports the Christian faith can be over-emphasized. Christians can get caught up in presenting evidence and neglect the heart of the gospel. As I noted in Session 1, this kind of evidence has, I think, two uses: first, it bolsters the faith of believers, and second, it challenges unbelievers by showing them flaws in their own worldview, which helps them see that they are, as the apostle Paul tells us in Romans 1 verse 20, suppressing the truth they know, which is that God exists and created this universe, including you, me and everyone else.

Marc Roby: Very well, so you want to discuss the nature of true saving faith today. I suspect a lot of people, who identify as Christians, would say that it is very simple; believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. What needs to be added to that?

Dr. Spencer: A great deal needs to be added to that statement. That statement, of course, is a quotation from the answer the apostle Paul gave to the Philippian jailer in Acts, Chapter 16. But, we need to look at that account in context to know how to understand it. True, saving faith has content, and that content matters very much. If someone says that he has put his faith in Jesus Christ, he may be saved, but he also may not be. There are many different so-called gospels out there, and many different ideas of who Jesus Christ is.

Marc Roby: And, of course, this is not a new phenomenon. The apostle Paul had to deal with this in his letter to the church in Galatia, didn't he?

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely, In Galatians 1:6-7 he wrote that "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all."<sup>1</sup> Remember that the word gospel simply means good news, and the good news is that God has provided us with a way of being redeemed from our sin.

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A way of having the guilt of our sin done away with, the punishment due to us for our sins taken away, and even of having the pollution and presence of sin removed.

But, as Paul wrote, not every message that claims to be the gospel is true; some of them are “no gospel at all”, they are not good news, but very bad news. In fact, they can damn people to eternal hell. In Matthew 7:21-23 we read what I think are the most terrifying words our Lord ever spoke. He said, “Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'”

**Marc Roby: That is a frightening passage.**

Dr. Spencer: And it's meant to be. These people thought they were Christians, and not just run-of-the-mill ordinary Christians, they had driven out demons and performed miracles. And yet, Christ tells them to go away. And you have to stop and ask yourself, “go where?” The answer is, to hell. Christ was telling them that their so-called faith was useless, that he would not own them as his, and that they were going to eternal hell.

**Marc Roby: But, many people who call themselves Christian today do not believe in an eternal hell.**

Dr. Spencer: I know that's true, and I don't like the idea any more than anyone else does; although I can intellectually see the need for hell. But, whether we like it or not, the Bible clearly teaches there *is* an eternal hell. Jesus Christ himself spoke about hell more than anyone else.

In Matthew 25 Jesus tells us about the final judgment and, in verse 41 he says that the king, who is Jesus himself, “will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’” And, just in case people think this isn't really speaking about eternal punishment, look at verse 46, where Christ speaks about those who are not saved and says, “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.” The Greek word translated as eternal in that verse is the same in both places. So, if the punishment is not eternal, then neither is the eternal life referred to, which is heaven. We can deal with the doctrine of hell at greater length in the future, but for now I'd like to return to discussing the true gospel.

**Marc Roby: Alright, you have so far made the point that there are different gospels, and that false gospels cannot save. So, what is the true gospel?**

Dr. Spencer: The true gospel is the one presented to us in the Bible. So, anyone who takes exception to anything I say here can look in the Bible and see whether or not what I say is consistent with the Bible. But, I must warn people to not be deceived! You have to be careful how you read the Bible. For example, people are tempted to look at 1 John 4:8, which tells us that “God is love”, and then declare that a loving God would not send anyone to hell and think that they have settled the matter.

**Marc Roby: I've definitely heard that view expressed.**

Dr. Spencer: So have I. But, there is a serious problem with the view. It is taking one three-word phrase out of context, importing a non-biblical definition of the word "love" into it, and then making it into an absolute statement that is used to overrule the rest of the Word of God completely, so that wherever the Word of God opposes this wrong idea of love, the Word of God is ignored.

**Marc Roby: OK, you've made the point that we need to interpret the Word of God carefully. Now let's get back to the question at hand, "what is the nature of true, saving faith?"**

Dr. Spencer: Let's go back to the Philippian jailer to find the answer to this question. In Acts Chapter 16 we are told that a crowd of people in Philippi were opposed to the gospel message and made false charges against Paul and Silas. As a result, they were severely beaten and put into stocks in the prison. Let me read a passage from Acts about what happened next.

Starting in verse 25 of Chapter 16 we read, "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, 'Don't harm yourself! We are all here!' The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They replied, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.'"

**Marc Roby: That is an amazing story. It also shows how different the times were; the jailer knew that if all the prisoners had escaped on his watch, he would be killed. It didn't make any difference how it happened. So, he was ready to kill himself to avoid a more unpleasant death.**

Dr. Spencer: It is an amazing story, but it is also true. And I want to draw our attention to a few things. First, it is obvious that the Philippian jailer had heard about Paul and Silas, and knew something of the message they had been preaching, otherwise it makes no sense for him to fall trembling at their feet and ask, "What must I do to be saved?" The question implies that he had heard there was a judgment coming, and that he knew he was a sinner and needed to be saved. And, because the prisoners were all still present, in spite of having been miraculously freed by the earthquake, he realized that the message Paul and Silas were preaching was, in fact, true. Perhaps some of the prisoners were converted that night also, but, whatever the case, they were so fascinated by Paul and Silas that they did not take the opportunity to escape. Therefore, the jailer had every good reason to believe that Paul and Silas could tell him what he needed to do. His actions clearly indicate that he knew he had something to fear and that he wanted to be saved.

**Marc Roby: So, when the context is considered, the message spoken to this jailer was not quite as simple as just "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved".**

Dr. Spencer: That's right. A.W. Pink wrote about the need to be careful in our understanding of this passage in terms of evangelism, he wrote, "It was no giddy, careless, unconcerned person, who was exhorted to 'simply' believe; but instead, one who gave clear evidence that a mighty work of God had already been wrought within him. He was an awakened soul. In his case there was no need to press upon him his lost condition, for obviously he felt it; nor were the apostles required to urge upon him the duty of repentance, for his entire demeanor betokened his contrition. But to apply the words spoken to him unto those who are totally blind to their depraved state and completely dead toward God, would be more foolish than placing a bottle of smelling-salts to the nose of one who had just been dragged unconscious out of the water."<sup>2</sup>

**Marc Roby: Now that's a vivid image of futility, to try and use smelling salts to resuscitate a drowned man!**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I like his illustration a lot. But, the main point he is making, which I am trying to make as well, is that the true gospel message is not simply "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."

**Marc Roby: How then would you summarize the gospel message?**

Dr. Spencer: I would say, as many have said before me, that there must be bad news before there is good news. No one is going to ask, "What must I do to be saved?" if he doesn't think he is in any danger. So, the first thing we must do is tell people that there is a holy and just God, who is absolutely sovereign over the entire universe. And that we have all rebelled against this God and are under his just judgment. We should all fall to our knees trembling and cry out "What must I do to be saved?"

**Marc Roby: That is not a pleasant message to deliver to people.**

Dr. Spencer: No, it isn't, but it is what we all need to hear. People don't like being told that they have cancer either, but if it is the truth, it would be cruel to not tell them. They can only seek treatment if they know they have the disease.

**Marc Roby: And the gospel is the treatment for the deadly disease of sin.**

Dr. Spencer: And it is the *only* treatment possible. As Peter tells us in Acts 4:12, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." The Christian faith is unashamedly exclusive. There is only one God who created this universe and he has made one, and only one, way of salvation. And that way of salvation is through Jesus Christ. No man is able to save himself. We must humble ourselves, acknowledge that we are sinners, rebels against our Creator, and cry out for mercy.

**Marc Roby: But, I'm sure some will ask, why is Jesus Christ and his death on the cross necessary? Why doesn't God simply pardon all those who humble themselves and ask for mercy?**

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<sup>2</sup> A.W. Pink, *Signs of the Times*, Studies in the Scriptures, December, 1937, No. 12, pp 20-25 (<http://www.chapellibrary.org/files/sis/sis-37-12.pdf>)

Dr. Spencer: That is a great question, and the Bible gives us a clear answer. In Romans 3:22-26 the apostle Paul tells us that, “There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”

**Marc Roby: There is a lot in that passage.**

Dr. Spencer: There is too much for us to go into all of it in the time we have left, but I want us to notice four things: First, all have sinned. We all need a Savior. There is no exception. Second, God redeemed us through his Son, Jesus Christ, whom he sent as an atonement for our sin. In other words, Christ paid the penalty that we owed, and God the Father has agreed to accept that payment on our behalf. Third, God did this to demonstrate his justice. You see, God is absolutely just, so he must punish sin. It is simply not possible for him to wink at sin and say, “Oh, don’t worry about it. I see that you are sorry for it, so I forgive.” No, his justice must be satisfied. But, because he is also loving and merciful and wants to save his people, God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to pay the penalty for us. The fourth point is that in this way, God’s justice is satisfied *and* his people are saved. That is why Paul writes that God can “be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.” He *is* just, in other words completely righteous and holy, and yet, he can justify those who have faith in Jesus, which means he can declare them just, in spite of their sin, because Jesus Christ has paid the demands of God’s holy law.

**Marc Roby: Now, that truly is good news! And it makes me think of perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16, “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”**

Dr. Spencer: Amen. That is the most amazing truth. In spite of my sin and rebellion, I will spend eternity with God in heaven. But, there is still more to be said.

**Marc Roby: I’m looking forward to hearing what that is, but we are out of time for today.**