

We are continuing our study of theology today by considering the basic message of the Bible.

Dr. Spencer, in our last session, you presented some arguments for why you think it is important for everyone to understand what the Bible teaches. How would you summarize the Bible's message in a sentence or two?

Dr. Spencer: The best short summary I know of is the answer to Question 3 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which says that the Bible "principally teaches, what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man."

But, of course, the Bible is not just a series of doctrinal statements and bare commands. It is also a historical document that teaches us about how God has interacted with his creation from the very beginning and it is in the course of giving us this history, which includes all sorts of fascinating true characters and stories and poetry and so on, that the Bible teaches us what we are to believe and what duty God requires of us.

Mr. Roby: Let's start with what we are to believe. Can you summarize that?

Dr. Spencer: Certainly. The Bible begins, in the first verse of Genesis Chapter 1, by saying "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."¹ That is perhaps the most important thing we need to know and the statement teaches us a lot. First of all, it teaches us that everything we see, hear, taste, touch, smell and so on, every inanimate object and every living thing, was created by God. We are just creatures, absolutely dependent on our creator for our existence.

Mr. Roby: That certainly humbles man, doesn't it?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it does. This creator/creature distinction is central to the message of the Bible and we must understand it to be able to please God. In Isaiah Chapter 42, verse 8, God tells us through the prophet, "I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols." And we are also told in Hebrews 11:6 that "without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." In other words, we must grasp this creator/creature distinction.

The first line of the first chapter of the first book of John Calvin's famous work, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*,² reads, "Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."

Mr. Roby: And, I might add, that the Bible says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom. But, what else does the first verse teach us?

¹ All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® (1984 version). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Translated by Henry Beveridge, Hendrickson Publishers, 2008, pg. 4

Dr. Spencer: The first three words, “In the beginning”, teach us two things; first, that all of creation had a beginning – before God’s creative work, the universe simply did not exist. And, secondly, God himself did not have a beginning, he is eternal.

Mr. Roby: Let me stop you there for just a moment because you will hear people ask, who created God? I tend to think this is a nonsensical question, but what do you say?

Dr. Spencer: I would say, first of all, that there must be something, or someone, that is eternal. As we noted in our first session, if there ever was a time when absolutely nothing existed, nothing would exist now, because nothing comes out of nothing. But our universe does not appear in any way, shape or form to be eternal. It had a beginning. It does not at all follow logically however, that God must have had a beginning. In fact, as I said, something, or someone, must be eternal. In other words, to say that we are created by an eternal God *does* answer the question of where we came from, because the only question that needs answering is how our universe came into existence. The universe clearly had a beginning and, if natural laws are allowed to run their course uninterrupted, will have an end, so it needs to be explained. But, on the other hand, the question, “where did God come from”, or perhaps, “who created God”, is, as you noted, a meaningless question because God is the only eternal reality that exists.

Mr. Roby: Exactly. What else can we learn from Genesis?

Dr. Spencer: For one thing, we learn that God exists in more than one person.

Mr. Roby: And, of course, that term “person” is problematic, isn’t it?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that word is often a problem for people. When we think of a person, we think of a distinct human being, who has his own mind and will and who is not in any organic sense part of, or synonymous with, any other human being. But God, we learn through the teaching of the entire Bible, exists eternally in three persons; the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And these three persons are not three separate gods, they are three persons that comprise one God. The word ‘person’ is, as you point out, often a stumbling block here.

Mr. Roby: I’ve certainly seen that to be the case. So, how do you deal with this perceived problem?

Dr. Spencer: I think it is critical to make the point that God is unique and we can’t expect any term that we borrow from other relationships to fit him perfectly. The important thing is that there is no contradiction in this doctrine. We are not, for example, saying that God is, at the same time and in exactly the same sense of the term, three persons and one person. We are, rather, saying that he is one God, who has eternally existed in three co-equal persons. We can’t really grasp this, but it is not a contradiction.

There is perfect love and fellowship within the godhead and that is why, when God made man in his own image, he made us in such a way that we need fellowship. We are all made, first and foremost, for fellowship with God himself, and secondly, for fellowship with each other.

Mr. Roby: And, in terms of this fellowship, the relationship between a husband and a wife – which is under severe attack in our culture – is very special.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. In fact, God himself said that it is not good for man to be alone, and so he created us male and female. Men and women are obviously different, not just physically, but emotionally and intellectually as well. We are complements – spelled with an ‘e’ – to each other. Together, a husband and wife, along with their children, are the closest we can come to understanding and reflecting the unity of the three persons in the godhead. We are all of equal value, neither men nor women are inherently superior to the other, but there are functional distinctions, just like there are within the godhead itself.

Mr. Roby: So, we have established that the Bible teaches us that God is eternal, that he exists in three persons, and that he created all things. What else does it teach us?

Dr. Spencer: It also teaches us why God created. We may not be given an answer that is as full-orbed as we might like, but we are clearly told what we need to know, which is that God created all things for his own glory. For example, one of the best-known verses to express this idea is 1 Corinthians 10:31 where we read, “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” But there are many other verses we could cite as well. For example, in the 43rd chapter of Isaiah, God is comforting his people and tells them that he will gather them from the four corners of the earth and in verse 7 God says that he will gather, “everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

Finally, in Philippians 2, after describing the amazing humility of Christ in dying for our sins, Paul tells us, in verses 9-11, “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.”

And it isn’t just living beings that exist for God’s glory, the 19th Psalm famously opens with the line, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” Over and over in the Bible we are told that God will not give his glory to another.

Mr. Roby: That’s a huge disappointment to most people!

Dr. Spencer: Yes, if we’re honest, we all have a tendency to think that the world revolves around us. But the reality is that we are finite, dependent, weak, sinful creatures who haven’t been around all that long and exist only because of God’s mercy.

Mr. Roby: And yet, sad-to-say, most of what passes for religion today revolves around how to make our life better. In other words, it is anthropocentric; man-centered.

Dr. Spencer: You’ve hit the nail on the head. But the Bible is very different, it is theocentric, or God-centered, from beginning to end.

Mr. Roby: I’m sure you’ve come across people who think it is somehow unseemly for God’s purpose in creating to be his own glory, how would you answer them?

Dr. Spencer: I think there are two things we need to understand about the fact that God created all things for his own glory. The first, is that creation does not in any way add to God's glory. He doesn't need us, or anything else in creation. He has had perfect fellowship within the godhead for all eternity and man has not been around very long, so the idea that he somehow needed us for fellowship or needed our worship is simply nonsensical.

The second thing we need to understand is that there is no better purpose for creation. If you think about God for even a moment, that he is the only eternal, infinite, independent, necessarily existent, absolutely holy, just, loving, merciful, and perfect being in existence, what purpose for creation could possibly be better than to make his own glory manifest? It will be to our eternal joy to be in his presence and to learn and experience more and more of him. So, so far from being unseemly, this is the best possible purpose for creation.

Mr. Roby: And, of course, we are also told that God himself takes pleasure in his creation; for example, we read in Psalm 147 verse 11 that “the LORD delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love.”

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I like that verse. It is sometimes a bit surprising when you look at how badly sin has messed up this world, but God definitely derives pleasure from his creation, and I think that is why we also enjoy creating. We are made in God's image, so we enjoy creating, whether it is painting, or writing, or making music, or whatever.

Mr. Roby: That always amazes me to think that we have been created in God's own image. What else does the Bible tell us about ourselves?

Dr. Spencer: The Bible teaches us that man was made perfect by God, but that he had the ability to disobey if he chose to. And, as we know, Adam did disobey God. I think this is the greatest mystery of all; it is called the mystery of iniquity.³ Why on earth would Adam and Eve, or Satan before them, disobey and rebel against God? They enjoyed perfect fellowship with him and lacked nothing, and yet Satan wanted to be God and fell from his exalted position, and then he led Adam and Eve into sin as well by tempting them with the prospect of being gods. And so, they sinned against God, which is called the fall. The result was exactly what God told them it would be; they immediately died spiritually – meaning that they lost fellowship with God – and they started to die physically – and eventually did die of course – and all of their posterity, with the sole exception of Jesus Christ, inherited their sinful nature; in other words, we are fallen.

Mr. Roby: And it is pretty easy to see the results in the morning newspaper, isn't it?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. You don't have to look too far. The reason we have keys to our houses and our cars, and passwords to our bank accounts and other things, the reason we have wars, prisons, death, sickness, all of it is caused by sin. The Bible teaches us that man is fallen and is at enmity with God and will be justly punished in hell unless something is done to redeem us. But, because we are sinful creatures, we cannot redeem ourselves.

³ I was wrong when I said that this is called the “mystery of iniquity”. That expression actually refers to a phrase in the KJV version of the Bible in 2 Thessalonians 2:7.

Nothing I do is ever perfect. Even if I do something that is, in and of itself, a good thing, my motives and execution will not be perfect. So, there is absolutely nothing I can ever do to pay for my own sins. Everything I do is worthy of condemnation, not commendation. So, the idea that God will weigh my good and bad deeds on a balance at the end of my life and see whether or not the good outweighs the bad is based on a completely unbiblical understanding of the nature of man. I have no good deeds in the absolute sense, nor does anyone else.

Mr. Roby: Isn't it wonderful that God's plan doesn't end there?

Dr. Spencer: It absolutely is wonderful beyond measure. We must praise God that there is more to the story. God chose to redeem a people for himself. Therefore, he sent his perfect Son, the second person of the holy Trinity, to become incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth, to live a perfect, sinless life, and then to offer himself on the cross as a sacrifice of atonement to pay for the sins of every person who will completely surrender all faith in himself and place his trust in Jesus Christ alone. That is the gospel.

Mr. Roby: And the word gospel, of course, means 'good news'... which it most definitely is. We're just about out of time for today, do you have anything else you'd like to add?

Dr. Spencer: Yes. I've obviously just given a bare-bones partial outline of what the Bible teaches, but I think it is important to point out that there is much more there and it includes a great deal of very practical information about how to live in a way that pleases God, which is also the best way to have a life filled with joy.

Mr. Roby: What the apostle Peter called joy inexpressible and full of glory.

Dr. Spencer: Amen.

Mr. Roby: That ends our time for today. Let me summarize what we have covered so far; we have seen that the Bible teaches us that God is eternal, that he exists in three persons, that he created all things, that he created for his own glory, that man fell by sinning against God, and that God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to redeem sinful men through faith in him.

Dr. Spencer: I think that sums it up.

Mr. Roby: Great, I look forward to seeing you next time.