

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine the characteristics of the Word of God, which is the Bible. Dr. Spencer, last time you discussed general and special revelation and then briefly defined four characteristics of Scripture, which can be remembered by the acrostic SNAC; sufficiency, necessity, authority, and clarity.

But, before we begin today, I think it would be good to suggest some reading material for those listeners who want to follow along in our study in a little more depth.

Dr. Spencer: That would be a good idea. The first, and by far most important, book I recommend is the Bible itself. Every Christian should be reading the Word of God every day. Jesus told us in Matthew 4:4 that “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”¹ The Word of God is food for a Christian. And you should read all of it, not just your favorite Psalms and stories. I strongly recommend having a good reading list and going through the entire Bible every year. It isn’t like a novel, which you usually read only once. The Bible should be read over and over again throughout the Christian life. Just like we need to eat real, physical food regularly, so we also need a regular diet of the Word of God. The reading list we use in our church, which I think is a good one, is available online as a pdf file that you can download, the link is in the transcript of this podcast.² In addition, I would recommend that you use a good study Bible, like the ESV Reformation Study Bible. The notes are a big help, especially for a Christian who is not yet extremely familiar with the Bible. Just remember that the notes are not inspired.

Marc Roby: I wholeheartedly agree that daily reading of the Word of God is a necessary discipline for a Christian to be able to have what the Puritans used to call an overcoming life. In other words, a life that overcomes sin, the world and the devil. What books do you recommend in addition to the Bible?

Dr. Spencer: Let me start with theology books. If you have never read much theology before, I suggest beginning with James Boice’s book *Foundations of the Christian Faith*.³ It is an excellent book, very readable, not too long, readily available and not very expensive. You will also find it valuable even if you are already familiar with theology. If you want something a bit longer and more detailed, I would suggest Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*.⁴ If you want to go even further, I would suggest Charles Hodge’s *Systematic Theology*⁵ and, of course, John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.⁶ Finally, in addition to the Bible and systematic

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 See <http://gracevalley.org/wp-content/uploads/ReadScheduleNonLpYr.pdf>

³ James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Zondervan, 1994

⁵ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997 (3-volume set)

⁶ E.g., John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Translated by Henry Beveridge, Hendrickson, 2008

theology, I would also suggest reading commentaries to help you with specific books of the Bible. Pastor Matthew's commentaries, available at graceandglory.pub, are all outstanding.⁷ Also, the classic Matthew Henry's Commentary on the complete Bible is wonderful and is available both online and in book form.⁸ The detailed references for all of these are in the transcript.

Marc Roby: That list should keep people busy for a while. What do you want to begin with today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to start fleshing out the characteristics we mentioned last time; sufficiency, necessity, authority and clarity.

Marc Roby: Very well. Are we going to look at them in that order?

Dr. Spencer: We are going to look at the first two in order, yes. So, let's go ahead and begin with sufficiency.

Marc Roby: Alright. You said last time that the Bible provides sufficient information for salvation and as our guide for living. What else do you want to say about that?

Dr. Spencer: The first thing I want to do is contrast the Bible with general revelation. Remember that by general revelation we mean all of creation, including our own conscience, our sense of right and wrong, and our intuitive sense that there is more to a person than just their physical body. As we noted last time, that revelation is sufficient to leave people without excuse before God. We read in Psalm 19:1-4 that "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world."

Just as Paul declared in Romans 1, which we quoted last session, general revelation is sufficient for every person to realize that God exists, and it should cause us all to give thanks to him for this life and to seek to know him. But, that knowledge is *not* sufficient for salvation, or to tell us how to live a life pleasing to God.

Marc Roby: I'm sure that statement will bother some people, because they wonder about the fairness of someone who has never heard the gospel being sent to hell.

Dr. Spencer: I certainly understand that objection. It was one that I had before I was saved. But the answer given to us in Romans 1 is that all people have sufficient information to leave them without that excuse. They *know* that God exists, but they refuse to give him thanks and truly seek him. That is why they are condemned. God tells us in Deuteronomy 4:29 that if "you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your

⁷ <https://graceandglory.pub/>

⁸ E.g., Matthew Henry's Commentary, New Modern Edition in six volumes, Hendrickson, 1991 and <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/>

soul.” The problem is that no one does that until and unless God himself draws us, as we are told in John 6:44.

Marc Roby: The fact that our salvation is based on a gracious work of God is emphasized in Ephesians 2:8-9, where we read that “it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. And grace is God’s unmerited favor. It is not deserved. We *all* deserve hell. What is surprising is that God chooses to save some. And he does that through his word, the Bible.

In 2 Timothy 3:14-15 the apostle Paul instructed Timothy to “continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” Also, in James 1:18, the Lord’s brother wrote that God the Father “chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.” Also, the apostle Peter wrote, in 1 Peter 1:23, that we “have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.” All three of these Scriptures show us that God uses his Word, the Bible, to bring us to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Marc Roby: But, as you shared from 1 Corinthians 2:14 last session, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. When we say that the Word of God is sufficient for salvation, we mean that it reveals all of the *information* necessary to be saved, but we need more than just information. The devil has all of the information, and he also knows it’s all true. But intellectual assent to the truth of the Bible will not save us, which is why in James 2:19 we read, “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.” To be saved, we must first be born again. Without that, we will never repent and trust in Christ alone for our salvation. Remember last session I quoted from James Boice’s book, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*. He said that “special revelation has three stages. First, ... redemption in history. ... Second, ... revelation in writing.”⁹ That application by the Holy Spirit begins with new birth, or regeneration. Without regeneration, knowledge of the Bible simply adds to our guilt.

Marc Roby: So, when we talk about the sufficiency of the Bible, we are not saying it is sufficient for salvation all by itself.

Dr. Spencer: Right. It contains all of the information necessary, but the Holy Spirit must do a work in us to allow us to receive that information with faith.

⁹ James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986, pg. 37

Marc Roby: Alright, so we now know what it means to say that the Bible is sufficient for salvation, what about the fact that we also said it is sufficient to guide us in living the Christian life?

Dr. Spencer: Well, we can again contrast special and general revelation. God has given every human being a conscience. And even in people who have not been born again the conscience mediates against many of our most wicked impulses. For example, most people are not going to murder someone just because they get angry at the person. Nor are most people willing to mug someone and take his money because they want it. But, we all know that there are many exceptions to this rule. Our conscience can be a good guide, but if we repeatedly violate it the Bible tells us it can stop working properly. In 1 Timothy 4:2 Paul writes about “hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.” For example, if you keep lying over and over, you reach a point where your conscience no longer objects. It has ceased to function properly.

Marc Roby: At that point I think you’re eligible to become a politician.

Dr. Spencer: You might be right about that. But in addition to becoming seared, our conscience can also be corrupted. People can, for example, use their reason to convince themselves that something is alright when, in fact, it is clearly not alright. A good example of this might be sex before marriage. People may argue that since God made sex it is good and natural and that waiting for marriage is just an old-fashioned idea that was part of the culture at the time of the Bible, but is not true anymore, especially since we have birth control now. But, if we examine the Bible carefully, we see that sex outside of marriage is clearly a sin and will always be sin. The point is that we need to train our conscience using the Word of God, in other words, using special revelation.

God is the one who defines what is sin and what is not sin. And God is the one who tells us what we are to do to live a life pleasing to him. The only objective place we can turn for that kind of moral guidance is the Bible. And the Bible is sufficient to tell us all that we need to know to please God. In Deuteronomy 32:47, Moses had told the people God’s commands and then said, “They are not just idle words for you—they are your life.” The Bible tells us in many places that we will be blessed if we obey the commands of God, which are given to us in the Bible. For example, in Deuteronomy 28:2 we are told that “All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God”, and this statement is then followed by a lengthy listing of the many blessings of God. The same message is in the New Testament. For example, in John 13:17, Jesus tells us, “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” Therefore, we can reasonably conclude that the commands given to us in the Bible are sufficient for the purpose of living in a way that is pleasing to God.

Marc Roby: That makes me think of Psalm 1, where we read “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.”

Dr. Spencer: That's a classic passage to make this point and, of course, in that passage, when he talks about the 'law' of the Lord, he's talking about the whole of the Bible. Or we can look in Matthew 7:24-25 where Jesus tells us that "everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock." This parable is again telling us that if you put Jesus' words into practice you will be blessed.

Marc Roby: I think we have established that the Bible, when heard or read by someone who has been born again, is sufficient for salvation and to direct us in how to live. Is there anything else to say about this characteristic of the Word of God?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, there is. The sufficiency of the Bible makes clear that we don't need any new revelation from God, either for salvation or for life. This speaks powerfully against the Roman Catholic church's view of tradition. The Roman Catholic church places the traditions of the church on an equal footing with Scripture. Which, in practice, really means that they trump scripture. But, even if they didn't, there is a clear problem. If any of the teachings of the church were necessary for life or doctrine, what can we say about the people who lived prior to the time the church came up with that teaching? The Bible would not have been sufficient for those people.

This also speaks against the Mormon cult. I had some Mormons come to my door one day who said that Mormonism was just like the reformation. Their claim was that just as Martin Luther and the other reformers corrected the abuses that had developed over time in the Roman Catholic church, so Joseph Smith corrected abuses that had developed since the time of the reformation. But that is complete nonsense. The reformation did not introduce any new revelation from God, it went back to the Word of God itself, which had been there the whole time. The existing errors were errors in interpretation and application of the existing revelation. Whereas Joseph Smith introduced a whole new revelation, the Book of Mormon, which contradicts the Bible at many points. Knowing that Scripture is sufficient for salvation and life guards against our being deceived by any new so-called revelation.

Marc Roby: The Bible itself tells us in many places to not add to the words of God. For example, in Deuteronomy 4:2 Moses tells the people "Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you."

Dr. Spencer: That is absolutely true. And similar warnings are given in Deuteronomy 12:32, Proverbs 30:6 and Revelation 22:18-19.

Marc Roby: That raises an interesting question though. How do we reconcile these statements with progressive revelation? If we consider the statement I quoted from Moses, I can imagine someone might object and say that if Moses told the people not to add to his commands, what are we to say about the rest of the Old and New Testaments, which were revealed after the time of Moses?

Dr. Spencer: Grudem talks about this in Chapter 8 of his *Systematic Theology*, which is on the sufficiency of the Bible. He points out that to say that *man* can't add to the Scripture is not the same thing as saying that *God* can't add to it. Now, of course, the Mormon's for example, would say that God did add to it with the Book of Mormon. But, I think that view is impossible to accept for two reasons. One, the Book of Mormon contains so many counterfactual elements and, two, there is no need for further revelation. Let me quote Grudem on this second point because I think he says it very well, and his explanation tells us both why there was more revelation after the time of Moses, and why there hasn't been more after the time of Christ. He wrote that "At each stage in redemptive history, the things that God had revealed were for his people for that time, and they were to study, believe, and obey those things. With further progress in the history of redemption, more of God's words were added, recording and interpreting that history"¹⁰. "After the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, and the founding of the early church as recorded in the New Testament, and the assembling of the books of the New Testament canon, no further central redemptive acts of God in history (...) have occurred, and thus no further words of God have been given to record and interpret those acts for us."¹¹

Marc Roby: That certainly is a powerful argument that we have no need for further revelation. And I think that is a good place to stop for today. I again want to encourage our listeners to email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org.

¹⁰ Grudem, op. cit., pg. 130

¹¹ Ibid