

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine the four characteristics of special revelation, that is the Bible. We introduced the acrostic SNAC, and last time we examined the S, which stands for sufficiency. We explained that the Bible provides sufficient revelation for salvation and for life, so that a person who has been born again has all that he or she needs to be saved and to live a life that's pleasing to God.

The next characteristic described by SNAC is necessity. So, Dr. Spencer, what do we want to say about the necessity of special revelation?

Dr. Spencer: We first want to remind our listeners that the Bible is *not* necessary to know that God exists and to know something of his power and glory. As we noted last time, general revelation is sufficient for that purpose and is available to everyone, so no one has an excuse for not seeking God, as the apostle Paul argues in Romans 1.

But, the Bible's revelation is absolutely necessary for salvation and to live a life pleasing to God. Let's talk about salvation first. In Luke 10 we read a marvelous account of Jesus having fellowship with some of his disciples as he was on his way to Jerusalem, where he knew that he was going to be betrayed into the hands of the Jewish and Roman authorities and crucified for the sins of his people. On the way he stopped at the home of his friend Martha, in Bethany, just two miles from Jerusalem. Martha was the sister of Mary and Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. While Martha was distracted with the preparations for dinner, Mary sat at Jesus' feet listening to him. And at one point, Martha came to them, clearly upset that Mary wasn't helping, and said to Jesus "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" (Lk 10:40)¹ Jesus' reply is very important. He said "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." (Lk 10:41-42) His point is clear. We must do all sorts of things in this life, including preparing dinner, but there is only one thing that is truly needful. Life is short, and eternity never ends, so the only really essential thing in this life is to make sure that we are saved and will spend eternity in heaven, rather than hell.

Marc Roby: Alright, given that our eternal destiny is at stake, why then is the Bible necessary for salvation?

Dr. Spencer: It is necessary because, as Peter said about Jesus Christ 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." And the Bible is the only place we are told what we need to know about Jesus Christ and his work. We can know from extra-biblical sources of course that the person Jesus Christ lived, as we noted in Session 21. But the Bible is the only place we are told about the real *meaning and significance* of the person, life, death and resurrection of Christ. It is the only place that tells us that Jesus was not just a man, but was also God incarnate. It is the only place we are told that he

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lived a perfect, sinless life to fulfill the law and then offered himself as a sacrifice to atone for the sins of his people. And it is the only place where we are told that if we repent of our sins and place our faith in Jesus Christ alone, we will be saved. As Paul wrote in Romans 10:9, “if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” To say that Jesus is Lord however, requires that we understand he is the unique God-man and that he is the Creator and Lord of the universe. And to believe that God raised him from the dead is a partial statement, but in the context of the whole passage, Paul is clearly referring to all of Christ’s saving work, his perfect life, sacrificial death and resurrection.

Marc Roby: The apostle Paul also notes the necessity of knowing the truth about Jesus Christ. A bit later in Romans 10, in Verses 13 and 14 he writes “‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?”

Dr. Spencer: And, of course, it is the gospel message of Jesus Christ that we are to preach. It is this message that is necessary for salvation. And the Bible is our only infallible source of knowledge. Knowledge about our own sinful nature, knowledge about God, and most importantly, knowledge about the only Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Marc Roby: Now, many people are disturbed by the exclusive nature of this claim. They think that people who sincerely hold to other beliefs will also be saved and, therefore, it is entirely possible to be saved without hearing and believing the gospel. How would you respond to that statement?

Dr. Spencer: I would respond first by pointing out a clear difference between biblical Christianity and all other religions. Christianity is the only religion that tells us the truth; namely, that we are all sinful, deserving of God’s wrath, and unable to save ourselves. We need God to do something or we will certainly be lost. Every other purported way of salvation is based on man’s effort, we must do something to earn heaven. But that is impossible. We are sinners and cannot do anything to earn heaven. Sin incurs guilt, which is a debt that *must* be paid. If we were able to stop sinning completely, we could stop incurring further guilt, but our guilt for our previous sins would still be there. The penalty would still have to be paid. And, of course, no one ever completely stops sinning in this life either.

Marc Roby: I think many people believe that their good deeds and bad deeds will be put on a balance scale and, if the good deeds outweigh the bad, they will make it into heaven.

Dr. Spencer: That certainly is a common view. But, it is wrong for two reasons. First, God’s standard is perfection and he judges our motives and thoughts as well as our deeds. Since nothing we ever do is perfect, we have no good deeds to balance the bad. And second, the point I was just trying to make is that every sin must be punished. And God has decreed that the payment must be a blood sacrifice. God told Moses in Leviticus 17:11 that “the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life.”

Marc Roby: I suspect most modern people consider that idea somewhat barbaric.

Dr. Spencer: I'm quite sure that's true. But we need to come to grips with just how serious sin is. It is cosmic rebellion and it must be atoned for. We recoil naturally from blood, partly because we are removed from the need to kill and prepare our own meat, but also because we intuitively understand that blood represents life. The fact that blood is required to atone for sin shows just how serious the problem really is. God cannot simply wink at sin.

Marc Roby: I'm sure that some would object and point out that we are called to forgive others, so why can't God do the same?

Dr. Spencer: God cannot forgive sin without the penalty being paid because he is the judge of the universe. If I steal from someone who happens to be a judge, he can forgive me on a personal level. But, if the case comes before his court and I am found guilty of the crime, as judge he cannot simply say that he forgives me. Justice demands that I be given some form of punishment and he must abide by the laws of the state and sentence me appropriately. As Judge of the universe, God must do what is just and right according to his own laws, and the just and right penalty for breaking any of God's laws is death—eternal death.

But, praise God, he paid the penalty for us. In what is probably the most famous of all Bible verses, John 3:16, we read that “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.” We must ask, “Why did God have to give his Son?” – which refers, of course, to his death on the cross. The answer is that the debt must be paid. Justice must be served. Either we must pay the debt, or it must be paid for us. But we are incapable of paying the debt, eternity in hell will not fully do it, so God chose to pay it for us. No other religion truly understands the need for an atoning sacrifice to pay the infinite penalty for our sins.

Marc Roby: And certainly no other religion reveals the truth that God has shown his incomparable love by atoning for our sins *himself*. It is humbling and amazing to think about God loving wretched sinners like us enough to punish his own eternal Son instead of us.

Dr. Spencer: Yeah, it's absolutely mind boggling. But, there is a flip side to this amazing love. To reject this gracious offer of God is terrible sin. People reject the offer because they don't want to acknowledge that they are sinners, worthy of punishment. And they don't want to acknowledge that God is the Supreme Lord of the universe. But, to reject this gracious offer is to show contempt for God's grace. It is to call him a liar as John writes in 1 John 5:10, “Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son.” That is why, if you go on in John Chapter 3 and look the next two verses, 17 and 18, you read, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.”

Marc Roby: I remember one of our esteemed senators recently grilling a Christian nominee for public office because he had written something about people who didn't believe in Christ being condemned already.

Dr. Spencer: I remember that questioning too. Apparently, that senator doesn't know that our constitution expressly forbids any religious test for holding public office. But, returning to the topic of the necessity of the Bible for salvation. Given the fact that God has decreed that there is only one way of salvation, and given the fact that the Bible is the only place where we learn of Christ's work of redemption, the Bible is absolutely essential for salvation.

Marc Roby: There is an obvious question I suspect some of our listeners are asking at this point. Since we must know what the Bible says about Jesus Christ to be saved, what about people who lived prior to Christ? How were they able to be saved?

Dr. Spencer: Salvation was available to the people who lived prior to Christ on the same basis it is available to us today, by faith in Christ. We look *back* on Christ and his completed work, but they were saved by looking *forward* to the promised Messiah. Remember that the Hebrew word Messiah and the Greek word Χριστός (Xristos), from which we get our word Christ, both mean anointed one. We spoke about the progressive nature of revelation in Session 6. We noted then that God gave the protoevangelium, meaning the first or original version of the gospel message, to Adam and Eve right after the fall. In Genesis 3:15 we read that God told Satan "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."

Marc Roby: And, as the term progressive implies, over time God revealed more and more about this Redeemer, who is Jesus Christ.

Dr. Spencer: That's true. And those whom God enabled by regeneration repented of their sins, placed their trust in the promises made to them, and lived their lives in humble, albeit imperfect, obedience to please God. In Hebrews 11 we are told about a number of great Old Testament believers and, in verse 13, we read that "these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth." In other words, they knew that they had an eternal home and they were looking forward to it. Their focus was not on this life, but on the life to come, and they fully trusted in God's promise to provide a Savior.

Marc Roby: And God is always faithful to keep his promises. You mentioned that the Bible is also necessary for us to live in a way that is pleasing to God. But, many people today think that they are pleasing God by simply doing what they think is right. What would say to those people?

Dr. Spencer: If they are not explicitly seeking to know and do God's will in his way for his glory, then he is *not* pleased with them, even if and when what they do *is*, in itself, good. We must remember the creator/creature distinction. God alone has the authority to tell us what is right and wrong. We need to remember what I said in Session 23 when we discussed the sufficiency of the Bible, our consciences can be desensitized by sin, and they can also be corrupted by our own reason when it operates independently. It is not our place to decide what is

sin and what isn't sin. That is God's prerogative alone. Our consciences must be informed by the Word of God. Our reason is a wonderful tool and we must use it to understand and apply God's Word. But, our reason can also be a terrible enemy, especially when we allow it to be influenced by Satan and the world.

Marc Roby: What you're saying reminds me very much of Martin Luther. He is famous for his stand at the Diet of Worms of course when he was commanded to recant his teachings and faced possible death if he refused. He said "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason ..., I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen".²

Dr. Spencer: I find it interesting that when people cite that statement, they often omit the first part and simply quote the part that says "it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience". But Luther had it completely right. It is *only* unsafe to go against conscience *if* our conscience is captive to the Word of God. The Bible must be our ultimate authority. If I find myself disagreeing with something I've read in God's Word, I must first be sure that I am understanding it correctly. But, if I am understanding it correctly and still find myself disagreeing with it, then I must change. I am wrong.

Marc Roby: At this point it seems that you have started to speak about a different attribute of the Word of God, its authority.

Dr. Spencer: You're right, I have sort of moved into that territory. But, it is impossible to treat these things completely independently. When we say the Bible is necessary for salvation and to live a life pleasing to God, we have to presuppose its authority. It obviously can't be necessary if it has no authority to speak on these topics.

Marc Roby: That makes sense. So, if we simply assume for the moment that the Bible does have authority, can you give us an example of how to apply this idea that the Bible must define what is right?

Dr. Spencer: There are a number of important and current issues in the church where the authority of Scripture to define what is right is of critical importance. For example, many professing Christians today have given up on the idea of eternal hell. They will either say that it doesn't exist at all, or that it isn't eternal. The basic rationale for believing either one of these two theses always boils down to human reason saying that it is somehow not fair. There is no cogent biblical argument in favor of either of these positions. I don't want to get into in detail now because our subject is the necessity of the Bible, but let me give a quick summary of a couple of arguments.

In Matthew 25:31-32 Jesus told us about the Day of Judgment, when he will come to judge all people. He said that "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will

² As quoted on https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diet_of_Worms

separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” He then goes on to describe the judgment and with regard to those who have rejected him he says, in Verse 41, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” And then again, in Verse 46, “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.” In all three places where the word “eternal” is used in the NIV translation of those verses, the Greek word is αἰώνιος (aionios), which means eternal, or without beginning or end.³ We could cite other evidence, but the Bible could not be more clear about the eternal nature of both heaven and hell.

Marc Roby: And for those of us looking forward to heaven, that is a wonderful thought. But, we are out of time for today, so are we done with examining the necessity of the Bible, that is special revelation?

Dr. Spencer: We are. But, I’d like to make a summary statement I think. The Bible is necessary for living a life pleasing to God precisely because it is God alone who has authority to say what is sinful and also to tell us how we are to worship him.

Marc Roby: Very well, that concludes this session. But, I want to remind our listeners to email their questions and comments to whatdoesthewordsay.org.

³ *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Walter Bauer, 2nd Ed., Revised and augmented by F.W. Gingrich and F. Danker, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979, pg. 28