

What Does the Word Say?
Session 50: The aseity and Trinity of God
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Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine the attributes of God. Last time we ended discussing the aseity of God, which is his self-existence. We noted that he does not need man in any way, which is a profoundly humbling thought. Dr. Spencer, what else do we want to say about God's aseity?

Dr. Spencer: I want to begin by looking at the Scriptural basis for this idea. Last time we talked about the name by which God revealed himself to Moses, which is "I Am". Remember that in Exodus 3:14 we read, "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: "I AM has sent me to you.'""¹ And we noted that only God can say "I Am" in an absolute sense. I can say that "I am", but, sooner or later, I will die and I will not "be" in my present state any longer. And there was a time when I did not exist at all. In other words, I am dependent; whereas, God is completely independent.

Marc Roby: What other Scriptural support do you want to cite for this attribute?

Dr. Spencer: One of the best verses is John 5:26, where Jesus says that "as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself." We do not have life in ourselves. As I just noted, my life had a beginning and it will have an end, which can come at any time. Even though we believe that all human beings will, in fact, live forever, either in hell or in heaven, our living is still contingent, totally dependent on God. God, on the other hand, "has life in himself", which speaks of his self-existence.

Marc Roby: That reminds me of the apostle Paul's statement to the Athenians. In Acts 17:24-25 we read that Paul said, "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else."

Dr. Spencer: That is an obvious result of the fact that God is the only one who has life in himself. All other life is derived from him. As Paul put it, "he himself gives all men life and breath". Another good passage is Psalm 102:25-27, which says, "In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. But you remain the same, and your years will never end." God existed before creation and will never perish; in fact, it is impossible for him to not exist.

We can also look at Psalm 90:2, where we read, "Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God." From everlasting to everlasting is a clear reference to eternity past and eternity future.

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Marc Roby: Of course, to speak of past and future is to cater to a limitation known to us as creatures, but not to God. In Verse 4 of that Psalm we read, “For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.” Which, as you noted before, in Session 8, is a hint at the fact that God does not experience time in the same that way we do.

Dr. Spencer: Very true. And Isaiah 40:28 says, in part, “Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.” God is everlasting – in other words, without end. He exists necessarily. Finally, in Revelation 4:10 we are told that “the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever.” To say that God lives “for ever and ever” is again a clear reference to his having no beginning or end. He is self-existent.

Marc Roby: That really is impossible for us to grasp.

Dr. Spencer: It certainly is. We are bound to our existence and dependence and can't really conceive of what it means to be self-existent and independent. In fact, theologians have struggled throughout history with the idea of the knowability of God. In other words, what can we truly know about God. It has often been noted that we are finite creatures and that the finite cannot comprehend the infinite. But, while we certainly cannot have a comprehensive knowledge of God, it is important to maintain that we can have a true knowledge of God.

Marc Roby: But that knowledge must be based on his revelation to us.

Dr. Spencer: Yes it must. In fact, the fact that God told his name to Moses points out that we only know about God because we exist in relation to him, he has chosen to reveal himself. And, in terms of that relationship, he is our covenant Lord. We cannot properly conceive of God outside of his lordship, or rule, over our lives. We dare not think of him as just the Creator, or some cosmic force, or as the universal policeman, or anything else. He is Lord.

Marc Roby: I think this is the main reason people get so offended at real Christianity.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. People don't get so offended if you talk about some force, or nebulous god who makes no claim to lordship. But true Christianity is different. John Frame wrote the following: “Although the opinion makers tell us that there are ‘many paths to God,’ they exclude the Christian path because it claims to be exclusive. The interesting fact is that both those who idolize secularity and those who promote alternative spiritualities agree in rejecting the God of Scripture. Only he is of sufficient weight for them to recognize as their enemy. ... Our message to the world must emphasize that God is real, and that he will not be trifled with. He is the almighty, majestic Lord of heaven and earth, and he demands our most passionate love and obedience.”²

Marc Roby: Frame does a good job of emphasizing the lordship of God. He also wrote that “The first thing, and in one sense the only thing, we need to know about God is that he is Lord.”³ And

² John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, P&R Publishing Company, 2002, pp 2-3

³ *Ibid*, pg. 21

he notes how often God says in his Word that he did something so that one group or another “will know that I am the Lord.”

Dr. Spencer: In fact, I did a quick search on my computer and that exact phrase “will know that I am the Lord” occurs 63 times in the 1984 NIV translation. And I’m sure there are other more-or-less equivalent sayings as well. It is a common theme in the Bible. We will come back to that topic of lordship more later.

Marc Roby: Very well, for now though let’s get back to our discussion of God’s aseity. You noted that even though we cannot know God completely, we can, nonetheless, have true knowledge about him.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. We only know what God chooses to reveal to us. But the knowledge that we obtain from his revelation is true knowledge as far as it goes. And we can clearly know from the passages we’ve adduced that God is self-existent and independent of his creation.

Marc Roby: The Westminster Confession of Faith gives a wonderful summary of this point. In Paragraph 2 of Chapter 2, which is on God and the Holy Trinity, we read the following; “God has all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of Himself; and is alone in and unto Himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which He has made, nor deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting His own glory in, by, unto, and upon them. He is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things; and has most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them whatsoever Himself pleases.”⁴

Dr. Spencer: That is a great summary, and it is also a good place to end our discussion of God’s aseity.

Marc Roby: What attribute would you like to discuss next?

Dr. Spencer: I want to discuss God’s triune nature.

Marc Roby: In other words, the fact that he exists in three persons, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. I think that this aspect of God’s nature is even harder for us to grasp than his aseity, but both of them highlight the radical difference between God as the independent Creator and us as dependent creatures made in his image. God’s Trinity is sometimes not considered an attribute, because God’s attributes are meant to describe God’s nature and all of them apply to all three persons of the Trinity. Therefore, it is most often dealt with separately and you will often see it referred to as the doctrine of the Trinity.

Marc Roby: This doctrine has caused many problems in the history of the church and even today you have Jehovah’s Witnesses and others, who call themselves Christians, but who deny this doctrine.

⁴ Minor updating of the English.

Dr. Spencer: The reason it has caused so many problems is that it is a very difficult doctrine to understand. But it is also a clear teaching of the Bible as we will show. It is not possible to be a true Christian and deny the Trinity.

Marc Roby: Of course, the word itself, the Trinity, doesn't occur in the Bible.

Dr. Spencer: No, it doesn't. But the term is one we use to explain the clear teaching of the Bible. Part of the reason the truth of the triune nature of God has been a problem is that it differs from the understanding of the Jews at the time of Jesus, so people sometimes think that it is a new teaching that contradicts the Old Testament.

Marc Roby: Which, of course, is not true.

Dr. Spencer: No, it isn't true at all. What is true is that the Old Testament teaching is not as explicit as that in the New Testament, but the idea of the Trinity is definitely there as we will show.

Marc Roby: Many people reject this doctrine because they claim it is a logical contradiction or, at the very least, incomprehensible. How would you answer them?

Dr. Spencer: The answer has two parts. First of all, the doctrine of the Trinity is absolutely not a logical contradiction. If I said that God is one person and that God is three persons at the same time, that would be a contradiction. But the doctrine of the Trinity says that there is one God, who exists in three persons.

The second part of the answer is that I agree the doctrine is incomprehensible, if by that you mean that we cannot fully comprehend it. But that in no way militates against the doctrine being true. Our physical universe is incomprehensible too if we are talking about a complete understanding. In fact, we don't even know what mass and energy are. In high-school science you learn that energy is the ability to do work and is a property of matter. So, for example, if I throw a baseball, that object possesses kinetic energy, which would allow it to do the work of breaking your living room window.

Marc Roby: I wouldn't be very happy if you did that.

Dr. Spencer: I'm sure you wouldn't. But you, and a whole lot of other people, would be even more unhappy if I somehow converted even a tiny amount of the mass in that baseball directly into energy. Einstein's famous formula, $E = mc^2$, tells us that mass and energy are in some sense the same thing. And even a tiny amount of mass possesses an incredible amount of energy, that is the basis of atomic weapons and atomic power. I don't want to go into a bunch of physics, but my point is simply this. We don't know what mass and energy really are at the most fundamental level. In fact, the best current understanding is that everything in our universe is a wave of some kind, there really aren't any particles in the sense we usually think of them.

Marc Roby: That is all very confusing to most people.

Dr. Spencer: And that is precisely my point.

Marc Roby: You wanted to confuse people?

Dr. Spencer: Yes. For a good purpose. My point is an argument from the lesser to the greater. If the creation itself is, at the most fundamental level, incomprehensible to us, wouldn't you expect the Creator to be even more incomprehensible? Why would anyone think that you or I, or any other finite creature, should be able to comprehend God? So, while we should *not* accept anything that is a real logical contradiction, we should not expect God's nature to be something familiar to us from creation itself or to be something we can fully understand. We shouldn't limit the nature of God because of our limited mental capabilities.

Marc Roby: That sounds reasonable. So, what biblical support do you want to look at for the doctrine of the Trinity?

Dr. Spencer: I want to start with the Old Testament since, as I said, people sometimes erroneously think that the Trinity contradicts the Old Testament view of God.

Marc Roby: Okay, what Old Testament passages do you want to look at?

Dr. Spencer: Let's begin in Genesis 1. In the first two verses we read, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." And, we are immediately confronted with a question. Who is this "Spirit of God" that is hovering over the waters? I understand that we sometimes also talk about the spirit of a man, and by that phrase we would often mean the central core of his being and personality, or something like that. But you wouldn't say that the spirit of a man was hovering somewhere. That usage sounds like you are talking about a distinct person.

Marc Roby: That is interesting, but not exactly conclusive. What other evidence do we have?

Dr. Spencer: Let's move down to Verse 26 of Genesis 1, where we read, "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness ...'". It is interesting that God refers to himself in the plural here. He says, "Let us", not I will, or Let me, or anything like that. Now some have said that this is a "plural of majesty". And they support this idea by pointing out, for example, that Alexander the Great and others referred to themselves in the plural. But, Wayne Grudem points out in his *Systematic Theology* that there is no other example in ancient Hebrew writing of this kind of use of the plural, so this is a conjecture with absolutely nothing to support it.⁵

Marc Roby: That also isn't the only place in the Old Testament where God refers to himself in the plural. Grudem mentions Genesis 3:22, 11:7 and Isaiah 6:8.⁶

Dr. Spencer: He also points out that there are passages in the Old Testament where more than one person is called God or Lord in the same statement. For example, in Psalm 110:1, which was written by King David, we read, "The LORD says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'" This is a very interesting statement. David was the absolute monarch at the time, so the only one he would call Lord is God. And yet, he says, The

⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 227

⁶ Ibid

LORD says to my Lord”, which implies two distinct persons, both of whom David refers to as God. Also, who could say to God “Sit at my right hand” but someone else who is also God?⁷

Marc Roby: That is a very interesting argument. And that passage was used by Jesus to stump the theologians of his day too.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it was. In Matthew 22:41-46 we read about Jesus questioning some of the religious leaders of his day. They had just been grilling him with what they thought were very difficult questions, in the hope of tricking him into some kind of error. And, after answering all of their questions, Jesus turned the tables a bit and asked them, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” They correctly replied, “The son of David.” Jesus then asks them a question about this psalm. He says, “How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’? For he says, ‘The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.”’ If then David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?”

Marc Roby: And we know that that question stumped them, because we read that “No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.”

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. They didn’t want to admit that there was a plurality of persons in the godhead, but there is not other way to understand that verse, so they stayed silent. Grudem points out that the Jewish theologians today still have no answer to this question.⁸

Marc Roby: This is a very interesting conversation, but we are out of time for today. I’d like to remind our listeners to send their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org, we’d appreciate hearing from you.

⁷ Ibid, pg. 228

⁸ Ibid, pg. 228