

What Does the Word Say?
Session 51: The God of the Bible is Triune
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Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine the doctrine of the Trinity. We ended last time citing a number of scriptural passages to show that God had provided evidence of his triune nature even in the Old Testament. How do you want to proceed today Dr. Spencer?

Dr. Spencer: I want to spend a little more time in the Old Testament, specifically, I want to look at Isaiah 48. In Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* he notes that Verse 16 of that chapter provides evidence for the Trinity, and he is in agreement on this point with the great Old Testament scholar E.J. Young.

Marc Roby: Some background to Isaiah 48 will probably help many of our listeners. Isaiah prophesied to the southern kingdom of Judah beginning slightly before the time that the northern kingdom of Israel was carried into captivity by the Assyrians in 721 BC and continuing on into the early 7th century BC. Even though this was about 100 years before the southern kingdom was carried into captivity by the Babylonians, Isaiah spoke of their captivity as God's punishment for their apostasy and, most amazingly, he prophesied, by name, that Cyrus would deliver them from that captivity.

Dr. Spencer: That is one of the most amazing and specific of all biblical prophecies. We spoke about it in Session 20. In Isaiah 44:28, God says of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, 'Let it be rebuilt,' and of the temple, 'Let its foundations be laid.'"¹ And Cyrus the 2nd, the king of Persia, conquered Babylon in 539 BC and let the exiles return to rebuild Jerusalem in 537 BC just as Isaiah had predicted about 150 years before.

Marc Roby: That is irrefutable evidence that the God of the Bible is the Lord of history. And after talking about Cyrus in Chapters 44 and 45, Isaiah goes on to describe the fall of Babylon and to assert the Lord's superiority over the so-called gods of the Babylonians, whom he mocks. He points out that the Lord alone is the creator of all things, that he alone predicts the future, and that he alone will redeem his people.

Dr. Spencer: And, in Chapter 48, God addresses himself to his people and chastises them for their false religion. He tells them that his "chosen ally" – referring to Cyrus – will defeat Babylon. And then we get to the verse we want to look at. At the end of Verse 16 we read, "And now the Sovereign LORD has sent me, with his Spirit." And we must ask, "Who is speaking in this verse?" Both Wayne Grudem² and E.J. Young³ say that the speaker is the Servant of the Lord, to whom we are first introduced in Isaiah 42:1, which says, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to

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² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 228

³ E.J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1972, Vol 3, pg. 259

the nations.” In other words, it is the Lord Jesus Christ. And look at what he says. He says that the “Sovereign LORD” has sent him, along with his Spirit. In other words, looking back at this passage with the knowledge added by the New Testament, we can clearly see all three persons of the Trinity. It is not *explicit* in the passage itself, but it is there. We aren’t adding something foreign to the passage, we are just making explicit what is already there. As John Murray said, “because of the unity of revelation and the unity of what we call both Testaments, what is patent in the New is latent in the Old.”⁴

Marc Roby: And I think you have demonstrated that the Trinity is certainly latent in this verse in Isaiah. Is there more to say about the Trinity in the Old Testament?

Dr. Spencer: There certainly is. In the chapters we have mentioned in Isaiah for example, we see that God – meaning Jehovah – is the Savior. We read in Isaiah 45:21, for example, that God says, “there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me.” We also see that God calls himself the Redeemer. In Isaiah 44:24 we read, “This is what the LORD says— your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb”, which equates Jehovah the Creator with our Redeemer. And yet, based on the New Testament, who is our Savior and Redeemer?

Marc Roby: The Lord Jesus Christ. His name is Jesus because he will save his people from their sins we are told in Matthew 1:21.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. And there are many other places in Isaiah and the rest of the Old Testament where God tells us that he alone is our Savior and will redeem his people. So, if you believe the New Testament at all, you must conclude that Jesus Christ is God. And even if you don’t believe the New Testament, you must conclude that the Old Testament speaks about one God who is, nonetheless, plural in some sense.

Marc Roby: To modify Murray’s line we could say that the Trinity, which is explicit in the New Testament, is latent in the Old.

Dr. Spencer: We definitely could say that. And now I would like to turn to the New Testament.

Marc Roby: Alright, where do you want us to look in the New Testament.

Dr. Spencer: I want to start with Hebrews Chapter 1. We read, in Verses 1-3, “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.”

Marc Roby: I love that passage. And for those of our listeners who may not be familiar with it, if they go on and look at Hebrews 2:9 they will see that this passage is clearly speaking about Jesus Christ, even though he is not explicitly named in these verses.

⁴ John Murray, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, Banner of Truth Trust, 1977, pp 172-173

Dr. Spencer: I love this passage too. And it is a very important passage because it tells us a several things we need to know about Christ. We learn that Jesus “provided purification for sins”, which speaks of his being our Redeemer. But we saw in Isaiah that our Redeemer is Jehovah. The passage also tells us that Jesus is the heir of all things and that God created the universe through him, which is a point we will come back to, but clearly points to his deity, he is the Creator. We are also told that Jesus Christ “is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word”. That is an amazing statement and we should take a minute to look at it.

First of all, Jesus sustains all things by his powerful word. That is clearly something that only God can do. Secondly, we are told that he “is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being”.

Marc Roby: That is a difficult phrase to understand.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. Let me use an analogy to help. If you see a great painting of someone, you might say something like “that is a perfect representation of him”. What you mean is that given the medium of paint on a canvas, the artist has done the best possible job of representing the person.

In the same way, given the medium of a human being, Jesus Christ is the exact representation of God. Now if you go back and look in Genesis, you see that man was originally created in God's image. Unfortunately, that image was radically defaced by the fall. So, in the New Testament, we are told, in Romans 8:29, that we are “predestined to be conformed to the likeness of” Jesus Christ. In other words, the radical defacing of the image of God brought about by sin is being repaired, so that when we finally receive our glorified bodies in heaven we will perfectly represent God in human form, just as Jesus Christ, in his humanity, perfectly represented God in human form.

Marc Roby: But, of course, Jesus Christ was more than just a perfect man; he was also fully God.

Dr. Spencer: And we will never be gods, contrary to what Mormons and the Word of Life preachers say. But, our point here is just that Jesus Christ is perfect man and, as we read, he is also God because all things were created through him and he upholds all things. If you go on in that passage of Hebrews you will see that the author applies several Old Testament passages to Jesus Christ in a way that makes his deity clear. But I want to jump to another passage.

Marc Roby: Which passage is that?

Dr. Spencer: I want to look at Titus 2:13, where Paul writes about the grace of God teaching us to say “no” to ungodliness, “while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ”.

Marc Roby: I know that the Jehovah's Witnesses Bible says that we wait for the “hope and glorious manifestation of the great God and of our Savior, Jesus Christ”.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I know they parse it that way, which requires inserting a comma in the Greek to separate God from Savior. But that cannot be justified because even in the Jehovah's Witness'

own Bible it says a few lines later, in Titus 3:4, that God *is* our Savior. It also says that in Titus 1:3. So in the local context of this letter, it is clear that our God and our Savior are one and the same, Jesus Christ.

Marc Roby: We have also looked at Colossians 1:16 before, in Session 43, and in that verse, Paul is speaking about Christ and says that “by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.”

Dr. Spencer: That is another very good verse. Everything was created by Jesus Christ, whether in heaven or on earth, whether visible or invisible, everything was created by him. There is no escaping the fact that he must be God for that to be true. He is not a created being, he is the Creator.

Marc Roby: And he himself clearly claimed to be God.

Dr. Spencer: Yes he did. Probably the most famous statement to that effect was made when he was disputing with some of the Jewish teachers of the law and he said, in John 8:56, that “Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.” To which they responded incredulously, “You are not yet fifty years old, and you have seen Abraham!” And, in response to this, Jesus said “I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am!” And that statement in the English does not properly give the force of the Greek.

We must remember that Jesus was speaking Aramaic, so we are reading a translation. But the way in which Jesus is reported as saying “I am” was not the normal, straightforward way of saying it. Instead, the Greek construction ἐγὼ εἰμί, is the way the Jews rendered the Hebrew tetragrammaton, Jehovah, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament⁵. And it is in the present tense, even though he is speaking about the past. The idea is clearly that he himself had no beginning, but existed always, certainly before Abraham. It is certainly reasonable to conclude that in writing his gospel, John chose this Greek construction deliberately to give the full force of Jesus’ assertion.

Marc Roby: And the people who heard him say this certainly understood his statement to be a claim to deity since we read in the next verse that “they picked up stones to stone him”.

Dr. Spencer: That is an extremely important point. Whatever Jesus’ actual words in Aramaic were, they were clearly understood as being an assertion of his deity. And, I’m sure many of our listeners are aware that Jesus didn’t just say this one time. There are seven famous “I am” statements in John. In John 6:35 Jesus said, “I am the bread of life.” In both John 8:12 and 9:5 he said, “I am the light of the world.” In John 10:7 he said, “I am the gate for the sheep” and then he repeated “I am the gate” in John 10:9. In John 10:11 and 14 he said, “I am the good shepherd.” And in John 11:25 he said, “I am the resurrection and the life.” In John 14:6 he said, “I am the

⁵ I was not clear in this statement; ἐγὼ εἰμί is used for the tetragrammaton in Exodus 3:14, which is where God reveals his name to Moses as was discussed in Session 49. Elsewhere in the Septuagint the tetragrammaton was rendered by the Κύριος, the Greek word for Lord.

way and the truth and the life.” And, finally, in John 15:1 he said, “I am the true vine” and then nearly repeated that in Verse 5, saying, “I am the vine”.

Marc Roby: Those are all amazing claims to deity. And he repeated that claim again when he was being arrested on the Mount of Olives. In John 18 we see in three places, in Verses 5, 6 and 8, that he again said, “I am”.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, and we’re told that the people fell down when he said it. There really is no doubt that he claimed to be God. Let me quote from C.S. Lewis because I think he summed up this point very well. He wrote that we should never say we will accept Jesus as a good moral teacher, but not accept his claim to be God incarnate. And he wrote, “That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”⁶

Marc Roby: Lewis had a way with words; that is a great statement.

Dr. Spencer: It is a wonderful statement. And because the doctrine of the Trinity is so important, I want to take some more time to lay out a careful biblical case for it. In doing so, I’m going to follow the outline given in Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*,⁷ which is very similar to what is used by Boice in his *Foundations of the Christian Faith*.⁸

Marc Roby: What is that outline?

Dr. Spencer: To firmly establish the doctrine of the Trinity, we must establish three things: First, that God exists in three persons; second, that each person is fully God; and third, that there is one God.

Marc Roby: Very well. I assume you are going to start by showing that the Bible teaches that God exists in three persons. What verses do you want to cite?

Dr. Spencer: Let’s begin with the famous beginning of the gospel of John. In John 1:1-2 we read, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.”

Marc Roby: When John wrote “In the beginning was the Word”, I’m sure he had Genesis 1:1 in mind, where it says, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

Dr. Spencer: I’m sure he did have that verse in mind, and he wanted his readers to recall it as well. The point there is that the Word existed eternally, prior to the creation, just as Genesis 1:1

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, MacMillan Pub. Co., 1952, pg. 56

⁷ Grudem, Op. cit.

⁸ James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986

tells us that God was pre-existent. But, for our present purposes the only thing I want us to see from this verse is that this it shows there are at least two different persons referred to as God. We see that “the Word was with God” and that “He was with God in the beginning”, which clearly speaks of two different persons, and yet we are also told the “the Word was God.” Later in the passage, in verses 14-17, it becomes clear that the Word is Jesus Christ.

Marc Roby: I’m sure many of our listeners are aware that the Jehovah’s Witnesses claim this should be translated to say that “the Word was a god”, which a little ‘g’ since the Greek does not have the definite article.

Dr. Spencer: As you well know, this verse by itself is not definitive on this point. We will make the case for the deity of Christ later, but this verse clearly is consistent with that view and shows that the Word, Jesus Christ, is distinct from the Father, who is just called God in this verse, which is the main point I want to make for now.

But, let me say just a bit more about this verse at this time. The definite article in the Greek tells us which word is the subject in this statement; so the subject is ὁ Λόγος, the Word. The word order, however, emphasizes Θεός, the Greek word for God. The context of the passage makes it clear that the Word refers to Jesus Christ and that when the Word is distinguished from God, God refers to God the Father. The lack of an article on Θεός simply tells us that the Word, Jesus Christ, and God the Father are not exactly the same person. William Mounce⁹ relates what Martin Luther said about this verse, that “the lack of an article is against Sabellianism”. Sabellianism is the view also called modalism; namely that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three different modes of one God, sort of like my being a father, a son and a brother. If that view were correct, then there would be a definite article in front of Θεός. Luther also said that “the word order is against Arianism”. Arianism is the view that Jesus Christ is not God. Jehovah’s Witnesses agree with Arianism on this point, so the word order argues against their translation. And, as we will see in a later session, there is a great deal of other evidence to show conclusively that their view is unbiblical, Jesus Christ is God.

Marc Roby: I’m glad you said “in a later session,” because we are out of time for today. I’d like to remind our listeners that they can send their comments and questions to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We would truly love to hear from you.

⁹ William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar*, 3rd Ed., Zondervan, 2009, pg. 27