

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today with a special Christmas message based on God's communicable attribute of love, which we saw last time can be considered an aspect of his goodness.

But before we begin I want to let our listeners know that we also have a Christmas present to offer to you. If you go to our website, [whatdoesthewordsay.org](http://whatdoesthewordsay.org), you can request a free copy of the book *Rediscovering the True Meaning of Christmas*, by Rev. P.G. Mathew. It is filled with great encouragement and hope for the people of God. This book will be available for free from now until the end of the month.

Dr. Spencer, we ended last time by introducing the context for what may be the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16, which says, "For 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."<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we did start looking at that, and I pointed out that the first word in that verse is often ignored. That first word "for" tells us that this verse is providing some explanation for the verses that preceded it. In this case, Christ had been telling Nicodemus that a person has to be born again to enter the kingdom of heaven and concluded, in Verses 14 and 15, by saying, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." So, John 3:16 is explaining these verses.

In his commentary on John's gospel, Mark Johnston writes this about John 3:16, "Why did the sinless Son of God have to suffer in such a way? John supplies the answer, and his answer is more staggering even than the brutalities of the cross. In what must be the best known words of Scripture, John says, 'For God so loved the world...'"<sup>2</sup>

Marc Roby: That statement is, as he put it, staggering. But Verse 14 mentions Moses lifting up the snake in the desert, and I suspect many of our listeners may not know that bit of history.

Dr. Spencer: You're probably right. Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus, who was a religious leader in Jerusalem, so he knew that Nicodemus would be familiar with the history, but we should give the background for those of our listeners who don't remember.

Marc Roby: Alright, well let me begin. Jesus' mention of the snake in the desert refers back to events that took place during the 40 years the Israelites wandered in the desert after God had miraculously delivered them from slavery in Egypt. We read in Numbers 21:4-6 that "They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Johnston, *Let's Study John*, The Banner of Truth Trust, 2003, pg. 50

detest this miserable food!’ Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.”

Dr. Spencer: And we see, as always, that sin brings trouble. And their sin was great. God had delivered them from slavery, was providing food daily in the desert and had previously provided water miraculously, so they had no good reason to doubt that he could do so again. Nevertheless, they weren’t satisfied with God’s provisions and grumbled against God and his representative, Moses.

Marc Roby: I fear that we too often think we somehow deserve more and fail to appreciate God’s blessings as well.

Dr. Spencer: I’m sure you’re right about that. But the people got one very important thing right; they properly understood that these snakes were sent by God as judgment against them for their sin. So, in Verse 7 we read, “The people came to Moses and said, ‘We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people.”

And God was very gracious to them, although he didn’t simply take the snakes away. It is often the case that God does not take our troubles away, but he gives us grace to bear up under them and uses them to discipline, purify and strengthen us.

Marc Roby: The Bible often uses the metaphor of gold being refined by fire.

Dr. Spencer: And no one likes the fire of troubles, but even the secular world has an expression that admits the truth, there is no gain without pain.

Marc Roby: An unpopular truth.

Dr. Spencer: So it is. Numbers 21 goes on to tell us, in Verses 8-9 “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.’ So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.”

Marc Roby: That is a great display of God’s mercy to his people.

Dr. Spencer: It most definitely is. But we must recognize that there certainly wasn’t any magical power attached to the bronze snake itself, this was just God’s way of making the people realize that they had sinned and pointing them to the fact that they needed to look to him for forgiveness and healing.

Marc Roby: And yet, even though there wasn’t any power in the bronze snake itself, it is interesting to note that it later became a snare to the Israelites. Sometime in the late eighth century before Christ, during the reign of the godly King Hezekiah, we read in 2 Kings 18:4 that Hezekiah “removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it. (It was called Nehushtan.)”

Dr. Spencer: It is a manifestation of man's sinful nature that he seems to constantly be looking for a God that can be manipulated. We want some simple ceremony, or something we can do that is supposed to obligate God to bless us with a particular response. In other words, we want a vending machine god; you put in your 1-minute prayer, or you perform a particular religious ceremony and he is obligated to bless you in some way. But God will not be manipulated by us. He does offer unimaginable mercy and blessings, but we must be conscious of the Creator/creature distinction. God makes the rules, not us.

The original purpose of the bronze snake was to cause the people to see their sin and their need for God. The snake itself was only a symbol. And God was gracious in not simply removing the snakes from the people. Had he done that, it would have been much easier for the people to forget that God delivered them from this pain.

**Marc Roby: We are all too quick to forget God's mercies. It is also important to note that the snake was a type of Christ, meaning that it was a symbol that pointed to Christ in some way. We talked about typology like this in Session 44.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we did. And this is one of the clearest examples of typology in the Bible. Jesus himself tells us that this event in the desert pointed to his sacrifice on the cross in the verses we've been examining. Remember that John 3:14-15 say, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life". And then, immediately after those verses, we read John 3:16, "For 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."

**Marc Roby: And we now have the necessary background to understand that verse correctly.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we do. This is the gospel message, the good news. This is the real reason for celebrating Christmas. The birth of Jesus Christ is an amazing event, but the reason God sent his eternal Son into the world to be born of a poor virgin in the backwater town of Bethlehem was so that he could live a sinless life and then willingly go to the cross, bearing the wrath of God and dying to pay for the sins of everyone who will believe in him. As Jesus himself said in contemplating his crucifixion, in John 12:27, "Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour."

**Marc Roby: That is incredible. Christ's willingness to die, and to endure the wrath of God in our stead, that's something I will never understand, but for which I am eternally grateful.**

Dr. Spencer: Christ's love is impossible to fathom. And John 3:16 gives us the reason that God gave his one and only Son, it was because he, meaning the Father, "so loved the world". It was the love of the Father that necessitated Jesus humbling himself and becoming incarnate, and then giving his life as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

**Marc Roby: Modern people don't like this idea of God requiring a sacrifice.**

Dr. Spencer: No, they don't. But God is just and holy and cannot simply forgive sin by winking at it. His eternally perfect justice requires that sin be paid for, and that requires a sacrifice. There

is an important word in John 3:14 that it is easy to overlook. The verse says that “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up”. That word *must* is critically important. It is the Greek word δεῖ (dei), and it means that it was necessary for this to be done. There was no other option. It was a divine necessity to satisfy God’s justice.

**Marc Roby: Yes, Paul tells us about this divine necessity in Romans 3:25 and 26. He wrote that “God presented him [speaking of Christ,] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”**

Dr. Spencer: That is the best verse to demonstrate this necessity. In order to be just, in other words to fill the demands of his own eternally perfect justice, and yet to justify those who have faith in Jesus, which here refers to a legal judgment that they are ‘not guilty’, it was necessary that Jesus Christ be presented as a sacrifice of atonement. The Greek word translated here as “sacrifice of atonement” is ἱλαστήριον (hilastērion), which means propitiation. As John Murray explains, “Propitiation presupposes the wrath and displeasure of God, and the purpose of propitiation is the removal of this displeasure.”<sup>3</sup>

**Marc Roby: People also don’t like the idea that God is justifiably displeased with us and wrathful toward us.**

Dr. Spencer: No, they don’t. This is the bad news that we must acknowledge before we can receive the good news of the gospel. We are sinners and cannot save ourselves. God is justifiably angry with us and we are, therefore, subject to his wrath. When people reject this bad news, they unwittingly reject the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ along with it.

**Marc Roby: Most people seem to think that God should simply forgive our sins without anyone being punished.**

Dr. Spencer: That does seem to be the case. But P.G. Mathew explained the biblical idea of justification as presented in Romans 3, he wrote, “Justification is not amnesty, which is pardon without principle. It is not seeing bad people as good people. Justification is based on God’s justice demonstrated in the life and death of Christ. The wrath of God against elect sinners was poured out on God’s innocent Son, the spotless Lamb of God. Without the cross, the justification of the unjust would be unjustified, immoral, and impossible.”<sup>4</sup>

**Marc Roby: Of course, we don’t like to admit that we are wretched sinners.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is a serious problem. Our society tells us from the cradle on up that people are all basically good at heart. But that is a lie, which even a quick glance at the morning newspaper will confirm. That lie leads to people thinking of Jesus as just a good moral teacher. Christmas then becomes a time to celebrate the birth of this good moral teacher who gave us an

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<sup>3</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955, pg. 30

<sup>4</sup> P.G. Mathew, *Romans: The Gospel Freedom* (Volume 1), Grace and Glory Ministries, pg. 130

example of a humble life. But that is not what the Bible tells us. It is not the truth. The truth is, as Paul wrote in Romans 3:23, that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” and as he wrote in Romans 1:18, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men”. And because of these facts, we need a sacrifice of atonement.

**Marc Roby: And Jesus Christ is that sacrifice of atonement.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, he is. But I think people sometimes view God the Father as this mean and angry God of wrath and then they picture Jesus as kind and gentle person and think that he comes along and cajoles the Father, perhaps even somewhat against the Father’s will, to not destroy his people. But that picture is completely and totally unbiblical. The Bible makes it clear that it is the love of the Father that is the ultimate cause of our salvation. It is the Father who gives his Son, so it is the Father that is referred to when John 3:16 says that “God so loved the world”.

**Marc Roby: Now that is an amazing fact. That God would love rebellious sinners. And, of course, it is not just the Father, Jesus also loves us. In fact, he told us in John 15:13 that “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”**

Dr. Spencer: You’re right. And Romans 5:5 tells us that “God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.” So we conclude from this verse and the unity of the godhead that the Holy Spirit also loves us. We also know that it is the particular work of the Holy Spirit to apply to us the redemption which God the Father planned and God the Son accomplished on the cross. All three persons of the godhead are involved in our salvation.

**Marc Roby: Now, when we celebrate Christmas we properly focus on Jesus Christ as our Redeemer, but we also need to remember the triune nature of God.**

Dr. Spencer: That’s true. But let me go back to the verse you read from John 15 and put it in context. In Verses 12 through 14 Jesus tells us, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.”

I want us to note that we can’t think of Jesus Christ as a helpless baby in a manger, or just as a dying Savior on the cross. We need to remember that Jesus Christ is the Lord of the universe and he *commands* us to love each other as he has loved us.

**Marc Roby: That’s an impossibly tall order.**

Dr. Spencer: It is impossible for us in this life because we still have the vestiges of our sinful nature with us. But that is the standard to which we are to aspire. And notice that Christ said we are his friends *if* we do what he commands. Obedience is not optional. Our obedience does not earn our salvation in any way, but it is necessary to prove that we do, in fact, belong to Jesus.

**Marc Roby: It’s a good thing that our obedience doesn’t earn our salvation, because our obedience is never perfect in this life.**

Dr. Spencer: Which is why the great theologian Charles Hodge wrote that “As portrayed in Scripture, the inward life of the people of God to the end of their course in this world, is a repetition of conversion. It is a continued turning unto God; a constant renewal of confession, repentance, and faith; a dying unto sin, and living unto righteousness.”<sup>5</sup>

In other words, we don't just confess and repent once, professing faith in Christ and then go on living the same old way. If we have been born again, we see our sin more and more clearly as time goes on and we see even more than before those things we need to repent of, and our need for faith, and we strive to put our sin to death and live righteous lives that please God.

**Marc Roby: Just like the Israelites in the desert would see their need for God when they were bitten by a snake, and then they would then acknowledge that need by looking to the bronze snake on the pole.**

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. That look demonstrated their confession, repentance and faith in God to heal them. And notice that when God brings trouble into our lives it is a great mercy if it causes us to see our need for God more clearly.

**Marc Roby: And then, if we turn to him in repentance and faith, he shows us even greater mercy by forgiving our sin.**

Dr. Spencer: And he does all of that on the basis of Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross. God is loving and merciful, but he is also just and holy. Our sins must be paid for; either by us, or by Christ. Most people focus on giving and receiving gifts at Christmas, but the real meaning is that God has offered to us the greatest gift that can ever be given to anyone, the gift of salvation. But we must see our need for it. If we think that our good works, or even our faith, will save us, we are as lost as Nicodemus was before Christ explained to him that he, and we, must be born again.

We need to receive the bad news that our hearts are “deceitful above all things and beyond cure” as the prophet Jeremiah wrote in Jeremiah 17:9. If we acknowledge that fact, repent and turn to Jesus Christ, trust in him alone as our Savior and obey him as our Lord, then God, in his rich mercy, will adopt us as his sons and daughters and bring us into his glorious presence for all eternity. That is the Christmas gift that God offers to us. And it's my prayer that God will grant that gift to everyone who listens to this message.

**Marc Roby: I join with you in that prayer. And that concludes this week's podcast. As always, we encourage our listeners to email their questions or comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org). We'd love to hear from you.**

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. III, Eerdmans, 1997, pg. 247