

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine God's communicable attributes. Dr. Spencer, last time we discussed God's love, which can be viewed as an aspect of his goodness. What are we going to cover today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to look at God's holiness.

Marc Roby: And the root meaning of that term has to do with separation.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it does. According to the great Hebrew scholar and Old Testament theologian E.J. Young, the root word "is generally taken in the sense 'to separate, cut off.'"<sup>1</sup> And God is separate from his creation in two different senses. First and foremost of course is the awesome fact that he is the Creator and everything and everyone else are mere creatures.

Marc Roby: Which is why we have emphasized the Creator/creature distinction a number of times in these podcasts.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And that is the dominant sense in which the word holy is used in the Bible with respect to God. But there is also an ethical sense because God is entirely separate from sin. The prophet Habakkuk exclaimed to God, in Habakkuk 1:13, "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong."<sup>2</sup>

Marc Roby: That is a big problem for sinful creatures like us.

Dr. Spencer: That is not only *a* problem, it is *the* problem of the human race. It is the problem that, in one sense, defines our existence in this life. We live in a world corrupted by sin and inhabited by sinners, the effects are pervasive. In fact, the Bible makes clear that since the fall, the sole purpose of human existence, from our perspective, is to deal with this problem. Coming to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and thereby taking care of our sin problem, is the one thing needful as Jesus told Mary.

Marc Roby: You're using the King James wording when you say "the one thing needful", but you are, of course, referring to the time when Jesus came to the house of Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, all of whom Jesus loved.

Martha was preparing a meal for them and was distracted by all of the preparations that needed to be made, while Mary sat at Jesus' feet listening to him. Martha then complained about this and Jesus replied, as we read in Luke 10:41-42, "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."

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<sup>1</sup> E.J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, W.B. Eerdmans Pub., Vol. 3, 1972, pg. 242 (fn 19)

<sup>2</sup> 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.™.

Dr. Spencer: That is, of course, the situation I am referring to, and I like the King James wording –only one thing is needful.

We must take note that there was nothing wrong with what Martha was doing, in fact, it was a good thing. But even things that are good and necessary in this life are of no importance in comparison with coming to know Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior. And this topic is particularly appropriate at this time of year. In our previous session we discussed the love of God, which was an appropriate message for our last podcast before Christmas because God’s sending his own Son to pay for our sins is the greatest possible expression of love. But today’s message is no less fitting for the first podcast after Christmas because when we are confronted with the holiness of God, our own sinfulness and need for a Savior is immediately and obviously apparent.

**Marc Roby: You said last time that people must receive the bad news that we are sinners and cannot save ourselves before they can receive the good news of the gospel, that there is Salvation possible through faith in Jesus Christ.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we must. And considering the holiness of God brings us face-to-face with the bad news. There is a classic passage I would like to examine today as we begin to look at this extremely important topic.

**Marc Roby: What passage is that?**

Dr. Spencer: It is Isaiah 6:1-7.

**Marc Roby: That is an amazing passage, where the prophet tells us about receiving his call from God.**

Dr. Spencer: And in that passage we see the most glorious and awesome vision of God given to anyone in the entire Bible. It begins, in Verse 1, with Isaiah telling us, “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple.”

**Marc Roby: A little history will probably help our listeners. Uzziah, who is also known as Azariah, was the king of the southern kingdom of Judah from about 792 to 740 B.C. He started out as a godly king, and served for a very long time – 52 years. But late in life he became proud and God punished him with leprosy. His reign however was a time of great prosperity for the nation.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, much like the times we are living in now, which should serve as a warning to us. In any event, P.G. Mathew notes the importance of this history in his commentary on Isaiah. He wrote that “Despite Uzziah’s unfaithfulness late in life, he had been an able administrator and military leader, and the people had looked to him for protection. Now his very long reign had ended and the people did not know what to do. It was in this context that God was saying, ‘Don’t

worry, Isaiah, the King is not dead.’ So Isaiah says, ‘*I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted*’.”<sup>3</sup>

**Marc Roby: It is always the greatest possible source of comfort for Christians in troubling times to know that God is seated on his throne and is absolutely sovereign over everything and everyone in the universe.**

Dr. Spencer: I agree, that is our greatest comfort. But Isaiah was given this comfort to an extreme degree by being given this vision of the heavenly throne room. Now in 1 Timothy 6:15-16 God is described as, “God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see.” Therefore, E.J. Young points out that “It is not the essence of God which Isaiah sees, for, inasmuch as God is spiritual and invisible, that essence cannot be seen by the physical eye of the creature. At the same time it was a true seeing; a manifestation of the glory of God in human form, adapted to the capabilities of the finite creature, which the prophet beheld!”<sup>4</sup> And Young goes on to note that “He sees God as sovereign in human form, and this appearance we learn from John was an appearance of Christ.”<sup>5</sup>

**Marc Roby: Of course, he is referring to John 12:41, which we read just a little while ago in our daily readings<sup>6</sup>, where John gives a quote from Isaiah Chapter 6 and then says, “Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him.”**

Dr. Spencer: That is the verse he was referring to. Isaiah saw a pre-incarnate vision of Christ. But let’s read a little more of the revelation given to Isaiah. Let me read Verses 1-4. “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.’ At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.”

**Marc Roby: Just the thought of being given a vision like that gives you the chills. The word awesome is overused in this day and age, but it is completely appropriate here. I can’t think of anything that would inspire more awe than this.**

Dr. Spencer: I agree completely. Awe means a strong feeling of fear, respect and wonder, and this vision would certainly inspire all of those things to the highest degree possible.

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<sup>3</sup> P.G. Mathew, *Isaiah: God Comforts His People*, Grace and Glory Ministries, 2018, pp 49-50

<sup>4</sup> Young, op. cit., pg. 235

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pg. 237

<sup>6</sup> Our church’s daily reading schedule is available from the home page of our website: <https://gracevalley.org/>

**Marc Roby:** And the prophet had exactly that reaction. In Verse 5 we read about Isaiah's reaction. He cried out "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."

Dr. Spencer: I again like the King James wording better here, it translates the first part of Isaiah's response as "Woe is me! for I am undone". Somehow the word "undone" is more powerful.

**Marc Roby:** That is a powerful word. Being undone does not sound like a pleasant experience.

Dr. Spencer: It isn't a pleasant experience at all. But we must ask, "Why did Isaiah say he was undone?" R.C. Sproul, in his book *The Holiness of God* provides an interesting perspective on this passage.<sup>7</sup> He points out that to be undone is a very descriptive term; it means to come apart at the seams, to disintegrate. It is the very opposite of being integrated, or coming together. Now we don't say that an individual is integrated; we say that he has integrity, but it is the same root. It means to be together; or, in casual speech, to have it all together. So to be undone is to realize that you do not have integrity, you do not have it all together. And who could say anything else in the presence of a holy God? When we compare ourselves with each other we may be able to say that someone is a person of integrity, or that he or she has their act together. But when we compare any of us to God, that illusion disappears.

**Marc Roby:** It certainly does. God is perfect in every conceivable way *and*, more to the point, he is, as we have emphasized, our Creator.

Dr. Spencer: And not only is he the Creator of all, but he is also the Judge of all. And this judge does not need a prosecuting attorney, or any witnesses to be called, or any evidence to be presented because he knows everything perfectly. And no defense is possible. Whatever charges he brings against us are guaranteed to be absolutely true. That should be terrifying. Think about a courtroom here on earth. Even that can be an intimidating place.

**Marc Roby:** Yes, I'm sure it can be. I've never been a defendant in a case, but even serving on a jury gives you an idea. The judge is separated from the attorneys, jury, lawyers and audience. He sits up higher, he wears a robe, you all rise when he enters the court, and so on. There is serious decorum demanded.

Dr. Spencer: And not only demanded, but enforced by officers with guns and a judge with authority to throw you into jail for contempt of court. That is scary, and it is meant to be because they are dealing with very serious issues. But the throne room of God is infinitely more important and impressive and the issues dealt with are infinitely more important because they deal with the eternal destinies of people.

**Marc Roby:** Which, quite literally, does make it infinitely more important.

Dr. Spencer: And we must also think about the standard being used by this perfect judge. We are told in Hebrews 12:14 that we are to, "Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord." In this verse holiness is obviously being used in

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<sup>7</sup> R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God*, Living Books, 1985, pp 42-44

the moral sense. We cannot become God. We will always be creatures and so cannot be separate in that sense. But God does demand that we be holy in the moral sense. As we saw earlier, the prophet Habakkuk properly said to God, in Habakkuk 1:13, that “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.” Because God is holy, we must also be holy or we will not see him, which means we will not go to heaven when we die.

**Marc Roby: And the only alternative is hell.**

Dr. Spencer: That is the only alternative. And every single human being alive will face judgment. We are told in Hebrews 9:27 that “man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment”. There are no exceptions to this rule.

**Marc Roby: God’s holiness, combined with his power and perfect knowledge, are extremely bad news for anyone who faces him standing on their own.**

Dr. Spencer: They are the worst possible news. Anyone who stands before God on his or her own will be sent to eternal hell. But, praise God, there is a way of escape. Going back to the revelation God gave to Isaiah, we read in the next two verses, Isaiah 6:6-7, that “Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, ‘See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.’”

**Marc Roby: Having a hot coal touched to your lips would be extremely painful, but nonetheless, it is wonderful news. Our sins can be atoned for.**

Dr. Spencer: They can, but not by our effort. Only God is able to do that. And he has done it through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We just celebrated his birth last week, which is the pivotal point in human history, and in a few months we will celebrate Good Friday and Easter, which speak about the culmination of his work of redemption.

**Marc Roby: And just in case some of our listeners do not know about Good Friday and Easter, we should point out that Good Friday is the day we commemorate the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and Easter Sunday is the day we celebrate his resurrection from the dead.**

Dr. Spencer: And praise God for Christ and his atoning sacrifice. I quoted from Hebrews 9:27 a minute ago, but let me read all of that verse this time, along with the next. Hebrews 9:27-28 tell us that “Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.”

**Marc Roby: And that is the glorious hope of all Christians.**

Dr. Spencer: It most certainly is. And we should be extremely thankful that God’s attribute of holiness is communicable, because we are not holy, and yet as we read a couple of minutes ago, Hebrews 12:14 tells us that “without holiness no one will see the Lord.” Therefore, the Christian’s ultimate hope is that God will perfect us in Christ and we will, ultimately, be perfectly holy in his presence.

Marc Roby: And, of course, our holiness is not the basis of our salvation – that is the perfect righteousness of Christ alone. We don't become holy in this life and then earn heaven by our holiness. Rather, having already been justified by faith, we are made holy by God through a process which begins when we are born again and acknowledge Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and it isn't completed until after we die.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. We will talk about that process in some detail in a later podcast, but for now let me just summarize it. All people are sinners in need of a Savior. But, praise God, he has chosen to save certain people. And those whom he has chosen to save he effectually calls, which means that he causes them to be born again, and they then respond in repentance and faith. And God then works in them to change them throughout this life. When we die, our souls are perfected and brought into the presence of God as we read in Hebrews 12:23. Then, when Christ returns, we receive our perfected resurrection bodies as we read in 1 Corinthians 15:51-54, and we then begin our eternal state perfected and living in God's presence forever.

During this life, however, this process of sanctification involves suffering, which none of us like, but it is for a good purpose. In Hebrews 12:10 we are told that "Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness."

Marc Roby: Now that is a glorious thought, to share in God's holiness. Which then makes us fit to be in heaven with him.

Dr. Spencer: That is God's glorious plan of salvation. The whole purpose of creation and human history is for God to redeem a people for himself. When that has been accomplished, this universe will end and God will create a new heaven and a new earth.

Marc Roby: We read about that in 2 Peter Chapter 3, which tells us, in Verse 13, that "in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness."

Dr. Spencer: And because it is the home of righteousness, or we could say holiness, it is only those who share in God's attribute of holiness who will be there. And the only way, as sinful human beings we can do that, is to be united to Jesus Christ by faith.

Marc Roby: I assume we have more to say about the holiness of God, but this looks like a good place to end for today. I want to remind our listeners that they can email their questions or comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org) and we will do our best to respond.