

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine Christology. In our last session we introduced what are called the offices of Christ. Namely, that he functions as a Prophet, Priest and King. And we then discussed his functioning as a prophet. Dr. Spencer, do you want to move on now to discuss Christ's role as our Priest?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, but I think we will have to begin that discussion with a digression into why we need a priest.

Marc Roby: Well, in examining the Old Testament idea of a priest last week we noted that a priest is one who intercedes with God on behalf of the people. He is a mediator in other words. In the Old Testament this mediation was primarily accomplished through the sacrificial system established by God through Moses and it was the job of the Levitical priesthood.

Dr. Spencer: That's all correct, but I think that as we get ready to focus on Jesus Christ as the ultimate high priest, we need to at least outline in more detail why a priest is needed and what he specifically accomplishes for us. Modern people, even many who call themselves Christians, are deeply offended at the idea of God requiring a sacrifice.

Marc Roby: Well, I have to admit that I have a difficult time with all of the blood in the Old Testament, and I'm very glad that I live at a time when we are not called to sacrifice animals on a regular basis.

Dr. Spencer: I share your city-boy's aversion to blood! But it is critically important for us, and for all Christians, to understand why a sacrifice is necessary. In his excellent book *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, the great theologian John Murray wrote that "sin evokes the holy displeasure or wrath of God. Vengeance is the reaction of the holiness of God to sin."¹

Marc Roby: Wrath and vengeance are not popular topics today.

Dr. Spencer: I don't think they've ever have been popular topics.

Marc Roby: And most people, including those who identify as Christians, think of vengeance as a rather unseemly thing, certainly not something worthy of God.

Dr. Spencer: I think you're right about that, and it is wrong for us to seek vengeance. But God declares in Deuteronomy 32:35 that "It is mine to avenge; I will repay."² And the word vengeance shows up 26 times in the 1984 NIV Bible that we are using. For example, in the same passage I just quoted from, which is called the Song of Moses, God declared to his people through Moses, in Deuteronomy 32:39-41, "See now that I myself am He! There is no god besides me. I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand. I lift my hand to heaven and declare: As surely as I live forever, when I

¹ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955, pg. 30

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sharpen my flashing sword and my hand grasps it in judgment, I will take vengeance on my adversaries and repay those who hate me.”

Marc Roby: That is a terrifying passage.

Dr. Spencer: It most certainly is, but it is also the truth. The reality is that God is absolutely holy and he cannot allow his holy name to be profaned without taking action.

Marc Roby: Now we don't often use the word profane anymore, so perhaps it would be good to define it. To profane something is to treat something that should be shown great respect or honor with great disrespect. It is to defile, or desecrate or degrade something that is holy.

Dr. Spencer: And that is what sin does. We are made in the image of God and are to be his representatives, ruling creation in his stead. Whenever we disregard his laws and sin, we profane his name. In Habakkuk 1:13 the prophet speaks to God and says, “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.”

We must realize that every single sin we commit, no matter how minor, is an affront to the eternal, almighty, Creator of the universe. Every time we sin, we are, in essence, saying to God, “You have no authority to tell me what to do or not to do.” Every sin is nothing short of rebellion against the Lord of the universe, the One who gave us life and the one to whom we will all have to give an account.

Marc Roby: And the One who will either bring us into heaven or send us to hell for all eternity.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, exactly. Sin is serious. Our culture tends to minimize sin, but God does not. It must be dealt with. We all inherit a sinful nature from our parents and then practice sin every day of our lives. As a result, we have a serious problem. God's anger is justly aroused.

Marc Roby: Which is never a good thing. When God is angry, painful things will happen.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And the greatest calamity that came upon the Jewish people prior to the time of Christ was when Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, captured Jerusalem and took many of the people into captivity in Babylon. This exile occurred in stages. One deportation was in 597 BC, and one of the people taken captive was a 27-year-old priest named Ezekiel.

Now had things been normal, he would have begun his priestly duties, serving in the temple in Jerusalem, when he turned 30. But, instead, God called him to be a prophet to the people in exile in Babylon. And the people didn't like his message. They were anticipating a short exile and were expecting to be returned to Jerusalem because they didn't think God would allow his temple, which was in Jerusalem, to be destroyed as we read in Jeremiah 7:4.

Marc Roby: And they were encouraged in that belief by false prophets. In fact, the prophet Jeremiah was still in Jerusalem at this time and he wrote to the exiles. We read in Jeremiah 29:4-9 that he said, in part, “This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ‘Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, ... Increase in number there; do not decrease. ... Do not let the

prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them”.

Dr. Spencer: And, at the same time, God spoke to the exiles through Ezekiel as well. We read in Ezekiel 13:9-10 that God declared, “My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and utter lying divinations. . . . Because they lead my people astray, saying, ‘Peace,’ when there is no peace”. Which should serve as a great warning to all modern ministers who preach and act as though God will simply wink at sin. As if he is no longer holy and no longer angry at sin.

Marc Roby: Yes, we have made the point a number of times that God does not change.

Dr. Spencer: God can’t change. He is perfect. If he changed, then he would either have not been perfect before, or would not be perfect after the change. So what God spoke to the people during the Babylonian exile is still important.

In Ezekiel 22:26 we read that God declared about the city of Jerusalem, “Her priests do violence to my law and profane my holy things; they do not distinguish between the holy and the common; they teach that there is no difference between the unclean and the clean; and they shut their eyes to the keeping of my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them.”

Marc Roby: And we are back to the idea then of sin profaning God, or profaning God’s name. It dishonors him.

Dr. Spencer: And as the perfect judge of the universe, he must deal with it. Sin is our problem. Because we are sinners in rebellion against a perfectly holy and just God we deserve hell.

Marc Roby: But the amazing truth of the gospel is that God chose to save some people from hell and bring them to heaven instead.

Dr. Spencer: And there is a very common misconception about how that salvation occurs. Many people, including some professing Christians, have the idea that God the Father is full of wrath, but Jesus came along, gave himself as a sacrifice and then pleads with the Father to have mercy on people for Jesus’ sake. John Murray puts it this way in speaking about the atonement, he says, “It has been charged that this doctrine represents the Son as winning over the incensed Father to clemency and love, a supposition wholly inconsistent with the fact that the love of God is the very fount from which the atonement springs.”³

Marc Roby: And when Murray says that “the love of God is the very fount from which the atonement springs”, he is speaking about the love of the triune God; the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Not just the love of the Son.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. Look at one of the most famous verses in the Bible, John 3:16. It 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.” Now think about that verse for a minute. It is Jesus Christ who is speaking, and he is explaining God’s plan of salvation to Nicodemus, a member of the

³ John Murray, op. cit., pg. 31

Jewish ruling council. So when he says “God so loved the world”, he is talking about God the Father. That’s obvious when you realize that this God “gave his one and only Son”. It has to be the Father that Jesus is speaking about. So it is God the Father so loved the world that he sent his only Son to save his people.

Marc Roby: And, of course, God is one, so it is inconceivable that there would be any difference between the attitude or will of the Father and the Son. It makes no sense to think that the Father could be full of wrath toward people and the Son wouldn’t. Or that the Son could love people and the Father not.

Dr. Spencer: That’s absolutely true. We read in Revelation 6:16 about the wrath of the Lamb, which is speaking of Jesus Christ. So we know that he is wrathful toward sin just as the Father is. And so, the quote I read from John Murray earlier is completely biblical and, therefore, true; namely, “sin evokes the holy displeasure or wrath of God. Vengeance is the reaction of the holiness of God to sin.” That is why we need a Savior. And James Boice says much the same thing in different words. He wrote that “the wrath of God ... is actually the unyielding and terrifying opposition of the holy God to all that is opposed to holiness.”⁴

Marc Roby: As much as people may not like the idea of a wrathful God, it makes perfect sense that the perfectly holy Creator would be wrathful against those who oppose his glorious being and works. And this isn’t just an Old Testament idea. The apostle Paul clearly states in Romans 1:18 that “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness”.

Dr. Spencer: And the word wrath is used 10 times in Paul’s letter to the Romans to speak of God’s just wrath toward sinners. Now, let me say that we will get into the topic of God’s plan of salvation in more detail later when we cover soteriology, which is the study of salvation. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to spend a few minutes on it here as we discuss Christology, because it has a huge impact on our understanding of Jesus Christ and his work. Jesus himself told us in Mark 10:45 that “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” In other words, he came to die.

Marc Roby: He is called Jesus because he saves his people from their sins as we are told in Matthew 1:21. Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua, which means “Jehovah saves”.

Dr. Spencer: And in describing our salvation we may say that Christ has atoned for our sins, or we may say that he has provided satisfaction for our sins.⁵, Murray points out that there are four

⁴ James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986, pg. 315

⁵ Hodge prefers the older word “satisfaction”, but newer theologies usually use the word “atonement”. See Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, Vol. II, pp 469-470

categories in terms of which Scripture sets forth the atoning work of Christ: sacrifice, propitiation, reconciliation and redemption.⁶

Marc Roby: I think we need to explain these four terms.

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. But, as I noted a minute ago, I don't want to get into them in great detail now, I just want to briefly present them so that we have a good understanding of what Jesus Christ came to do for his people.

The first category is that of sacrifice. And Murray explains that a sacrifice has reference to sin and guilt. He wrote that "Sin involves a certain liability, a liability arising from the holiness of God, on the one hand, and the gravity of sin as the contradiction of that holiness, on the other. The sacrifice was the divinely instituted provision whereby the sin might be covered and the liability to divine wrath and curse removed."⁷

Marc Roby: Alright, what about propitiation? To propitiate means to appease someone's anger and make them propitious, or favorably disposed, toward us.

Dr. Spencer: Well, Murray writes that "Propitiation presupposes the wrath of and displeasure of God, and the purpose of propitiation is the removal of this displeasure."⁸ Propitiation has to do with God's attitude toward us, whereas sacrifice has to do with taking away or covering the cause of God's displeasure in us.

Marc Roby: What about reconciliation? That also sounds close to propitiation. To be reconciled is to be restored to friendly relations.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, but in propitiation the focus is on removing God's wrath, whereas in reconciliation the focus is on restoring right relations. In Romans 5:1 we read, "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ".

Marc Roby: And that leads us finally to redemption.

Dr. Spencer: And, of course, to redeem something is to buy it back. We can redeem something that we have given to a pawn shop as collateral for a loan for example. Or you can pay a ransom to redeem someone who has been kidnapped or taken to be a slave.

Marc Roby: And unbelievers are described in Romans Chapter 6 as being slaves to sin. We read in Verses 16-18, "Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness."

⁶ John Murray, op. cit., pg. 19

⁷ Ibid, pg. 25

⁸ Ibid, pg. 30

Dr. Spencer: That is a very challenging passage. I don't know any unbeliever who will admit to being a slave to sin. But the reality is that if you have not been born again, you cannot obey God's law out of love for God. Therefore, everything you do is sin because the motive is wrong even if the action is, in itself, right. It is also challenging to Christians because it tells us clearly that we are to be slaves to righteousness; in other words, we are to be obedient all the time.

Marc Roby: And none of us fulfill that requirement perfectly.

Dr. Spencer: No, we don't. But that is what we are called to if we have been saved. Murray summarizes these four categories in the following way, he writes, "Just as sacrifice is directed to the need created by our guilt, propitiation to the need that arises from the wrath of God, and reconciliation to the need arising from our alienation from God, so redemption is directed to the bondage to which our sin has consigned us."⁹

Marc Roby: Yes, that's a great summary. We are nearly out of time, is there anything else you'd like to say for today?

Dr. Spencer: Yes. I'd like to wrap-up this discussion of the nature of the atonement by reading one last quote from Murray. He wrote that "Thought and expression stagger in the presence of the spectacle that confronts us in the vicarious sin-bearing of the Lord of glory. Here we must realize that we are dealing with the mystery of godliness, and eternity will not reach the bottom of it nor exhaust its praise."¹⁰

Marc Roby: It is staggering to consider what God has done for us. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit chose to love us. Jesus agreed to become incarnate and live a perfect life in our stead and then die on the cross to pay for our sins, and the Holy Spirit applies that redemption to each Christian individually by bringing about new birth. Praise God!

And with that, we are out of time for today. So, let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org, we'd appreciate hearing from you.

⁹ Ibid, pg. 43

¹⁰ Ibid, preface