

OpenTheo

Is Christianity Really a Story of Reality?

February 1, 2024



#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether Christianity is about following Jesus rather than a story of reality, what John the Baptist meant when he said, "He must increase, but I must decrease," and why John the Baptist seemed confused about whether or not Jesus was the Messiah after he had already confessed he was.

* You said Christianity is a story of reality, and I agree that the Bible is a story of reality (it helps lead our lives), but isn't Christianity about following Jesus?

* What did John the Baptist mean when he said, "He must increase, but I must decrease," and how does that apply to us?

* In John 1:34, John the Baptist acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God after baptizing him, so why does he seem confused in Luke 7:19 and Matthew 11:3?

Transcript

I'm Amy Hall, I'm here with Greg Cocker, and you're listening to Stand to Reason's hashtag SDRaskpodcast. Here we are. Welcome, Greg.

Thank you. We're going to start with a question from Levi today. You had said, help me if I got this wrong, that Christianity is a story of reality.

I agree that the Bible is a story of reality, at least in part, i.e., it helps us lead us in our lives, but Christianity, isn't it about following Jesus? Christian means Christ follower, after all. Well, it does mean Christ follower. Actually, the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch, so the word was used to describe the disciples of Jesus, but Christianity doesn't start with the Gospels.

And it's interesting I did write a book called the title of which is the story of reality that Nancy Piersi wrote the introduction for, and her first couple lines of the introduction was a reference to Francis Shafer who had a big impact in both of our lives, Nancy's and mine. And she said, Francis Shafer used to always say that the story of Christianity

doesn't start with Jesus, it starts with, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And so this is the way that I'm approaching it.

Jesus is a piece of the story, and ultimately the capstone, but it's kind of like saying, I'm trying to think of an illustration from, this is like seeing the story of the Lord of the Rings, Frodo is all that it's all about. It's Frodo. Well, it's not just Frodo.

It started before Frodo. It started with the the Hobbit. That's part of the story that led up to the circumstances that Frodo found himself in.

And there were other players that were really important because at the very end it's the king that gets re-crowned to, you know, the return of the king is the last book. So to say, well, it's just all about Frodo is to truncate the story so much that you lose the substance of the story itself. The same thing is true.

We are Christ followers. We are disciples of Jesus, but Jesus didn't fall out of heaven into a kind of theological vacuum and then just out-spouting things that people had to understand or believe. He was the fulfillment.

That's why Paul argued for Jesus with Jews from the Old Testament. He's the fulfillment. He is the central piece of the story.

The story makes no sense without him, just like the Lord of the Rings would make no sense without Frodo, but it isn't just isolated to Jesus. So, and when we think of that, if we think it's all about just Jesus, then we truncate the story in a way that I think undermines the significance of the story and the big picture. What is God doing in the story? He's solving the problem of evil.

This is another way of talking about it, okay? He solves the problem of evil by making provision for the forgiveness of evil people and then restoring the world that was corrupted by evil, okay? That's all part of the story. Now, Jesus is obvious as central to that, but in a certain sense, the story is bigger than Jesus, because it's God's story of restoration. And he comes to the planet, he becomes a human, he adds humanity to his divinity and the person of Jesus, a hundred percent God, a hundred percent man, to accomplish something for the world that only Jesus could accomplish.

But there's a whole bunch of stuff that comes before Jesus called the Old Testament. It's there for a reason. And there's a bunch of stuff that comes after Jesus, because Jesus is for accounts, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

All the rest of the writings are to bring understanding to how Jesus fits into the larger picture and how we benefit from that and grow, and then we can fulfill God's broader purpose. Paul puts it this way, present every man complete in Christ, and then we have the book or a revelation where there's a final restoration, final justice and final restoration. It's not just the red letters.

The story of reality is much bigger than just the red letters in the gospels. Also, it's unclear to me, I just want to point out a couple things. It's unclear to me what he means by, I agree that the Bible is a story of reality, it helps us lead our lives.

I get a sense here that there's an image of the Bible as a list of rules, and then he says Christianity is about following Jesus, so that again gives the idea of these are the list of rules that you're to follow. Christianity is the things you're supposed to do as you follow Jesus. Now forgive me if that's not what you mean Levi, but I'm just going to address that just in case.

The problem with that is I think it misses the entire story. The purpose of the Bible is to reveal who God is, and it does that by telling the story of what God has done. It also includes the rules that he gave, the laws that he gave, because that reveals who God is.

It reveals Jesus, who he is, what he did, and it shows us where we're going. It is an entire worldview. It gives us ideas about what's the nature of reality, what's the problem with reality, what do we need to do to be rescued from the problems of this reality.

It explains what is good, what is evil, who God is. All these things are encompassed in this story that starts, has a beginning, has a middle, has an end. It's an entire story.

It's not a list of rules. It's a way of God revealing himself through a story and also through rules, but it's more than the rules. So the Bible encompasses all of these things.

Now when you say isn't Christianity about following Jesus, well you have to know what that means. So when you say it's God's children, we are heirs with Christ, well what do all these things mean? It's part of this story. And all of these things play into that.

So Christianity is not just one narrow aspect of life. It's a vision of all of reality. Who we are, why we're here, where we're going, what we need to do, all these things it involves.

So I think there are a lot of people, and even Levi, this isn't your question. I think there are a lot of people who think that Christianity is just about rules, and they miss all of these aspects of understanding the world view that the Bible describes. And because of that, they know God less.

They don't know him as well as they could have. And they don't know good from evil as well as they might, because everything that's given to us in the Bible is meant to reveal God to us. Right, right.

Following Jesus doesn't just mean doing the things He says to do, but also believing the things about reality that Jesus believes. His whole take on everything. And that's critical.

And a lot of people don't understand that. And this is part of the difficulty. It's the reason that I wrote the book is to give people a robust understanding of how the whole story fits

together.

Because once you see how it fits together, it answers a whole bunch of questions. And I say this in the beginning, it answers the question about the problem of evil. It also answers because the problem of evil is not a problem for Christians the way many people think it is, because our story is all about the problem of evil and our story is not over yet.

And also, it's about why Jesus is the only way of salvation. It explains that when you understand the story, you see that. So it isn't just following Jesus, but the challenge that we face with Jesus in the world is that's narrow-minded, arrogant and bigoted to say He's the only way.

Well, you say that because you don't understand the story. And a lot of Christians are flummoxed because they don't understand the story the way Jesus understood it. And so this is what the full display of the plot line of the story characterized by five words, God, man, Jesus, cross and resurrection.

That's the plot line. That's the events in the order they take place. It's the most important things that happen.

And it tells us the beginning and the end and everything important that happens in between. And that is meant to give a fuller understanding of who Jesus was, why He came and what it means to follow Him. It's not just love your neighbor.

It's what is love. What does it mean to love your neighbor? And that all it relates to the entire worldview, the entire story of reality that we learn in the Bible. And what happens, how do we manage the fact that we don't love our living? Yes, thank you.

I was going to say that. I forgot. Yes, of course.

But that's right in the discussion of the Good Samaritan does not have morality play. It's meant to frustrate our ability to do the second commandment. Our neighbors are the biggest enemy who, you know, put that in your pipe and smoke kind of thing.

That's in the text. Take a look. Not the pipe part, but that's my prayer for you.

Okay. Let's go into a question from Anonymous. What did John the Baptist mean when he said he must increase, but I must decrease? How does that apply to us? Well, first of all, I think the meaning is not too tricky.

John the Baptist was a big deal at the time Jesus was about to begin his ministry. He came before Jesus because he was the prophet heralding the coming of the Lord, make straight the way of the Lord, citing Old Testament passages, I think, Malachi, maybe Isaiah, any event. He said, I'm the one who's the voice crying in the wilderness.

Are you the Messiah? No. Are you the prophet, the one that Moses predicted? No. I'm the voice of one crying.

So that all of Israel, the text says, that means lots of people were going down by the Jordan where John was baptizing. So he was an event. He was a big deal.

Everybody knew about that. They even sent the religious leaders down there trying to figure out what is going on here. Okay.

And then he says, but someone else is coming who sandals. I'm unworthy to tie and he will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Now it's clear in the context of the fire is judgment.

He's the one bringing salvation and he's one bringing judgment. Okay. That's the one that's to come.

All right. So when John, John the Baptist starts his ministry, he's the big guy. He's the popular one.

Now Jesus comes on and he is just the forerunner. Jesus is the main event. So I guess, since I said made event, I guess you could think of it like, I don't go to rock concerts, but usually they have like somebody open for the big star, right? You have the opening, what group? Or you have comics, you have the opening comic.

These are also also rans or second, you know, then you got the main event. Jesus is the main event. And that's all the John.

I'm up here. Jesus is unknown. He's going to come in and he must increase.

And I must decrease. I take the back seat to the one that I came to herald. Doesn't he say this after he's asked, well, do you care that you're remembering this right? That your disciples are going into Jesus after Jesus? Yeah, I think so.

But no, this is the way it's supposed to work. Okay, now sometimes notice though that there is a dynamic here. One person is heralding the other and that is playing a more important role in the drama here.

And that first person is willing to take the back seat and willing to give deference to the person at that point who's the main player. Now, of course, he's the main player because he's the Messiah. He's God come down.

He's Emmanuel, God with us. But the same circumstance applies in other situations in the church, the same dynamic in other circumstances in the church. And this is why, and I've even said this, you know, kind of jokingly in one sense citing the language here, but being very in a certain sense serious about it.

So we have realities, right? And I used to be on the main stage when we first started rethink along with the other guys and now I'm off the main stage and the rest of the team is on the main stage. And my thinking is I must decrease while they increase because there's a transition here. I'm not going to be around forever.

Other players are going to be around longer than me. The leadership is going to change eventually. So it is appropriate for me in the same way that John the Baptist began to bow out and let Jesus take center stage.

It's appropriate for me to be bowing out and let the others take the center stage who will carry on after I'm gone, kind of thing. So there's an application of the same concept, not with the same gravity, obviously, because you guys aren't Jesus. And I'm not John the Baptist, but I think I've even used the language.

You know, they must increase and I must decrease. That's okay. It's all right for me.

Some leaders are not willing to let go, you know, and that's not good because there is a dynamic here. We see the dynamic in John the Baptist and Jesus, but we also see a radical difference in station between the two. Okay.

But that same dynamic can play out in human relationships. I think that's appropriate as well. I think he's probably also there's some indication there of the idea that the time of the prophets is over.

You know, this is something that Hebrews references in the past got spoke to us through the prophets. And in the last days, he speaks with us through his son. So I think there's probably an element of that here, too, where the prophets are now fading away.

And now Jesus is here. In the particular role that prophets play to the Old Testament, there's still prophets in the New Testament, but they are just mouthpieces around leaders, a definitive leaders like the apostles have that role now in the New Testament. So when we're trying to apply versus to us, it's not always sometimes you're just learning things about what happened and it's not always a direct application.

Now you gave a direct application just with us, but I think one way kind of a more general way of thinking about decreasing while Jesus increases. And this is something I think about all the time, but I can remember that a long time ago, I went to Stephen Curtis Chapman concert. And I remember leaving there thinking about how great God was, not how great he was, not that he didn't do a great job.

He did, but the way he did it, he was pointing to Jesus in a way that when I left, I was thinking about him. And I was worshipping him rather than Stephen Curtis Chapman. And that has always, I've always wanted to be that.

I mean, even today, every time we do this show, I pray that because when I want, what I

want is for people to walk away from the show, thinking about how great God is. And so that's my way. I don't want to promote myself.

I want to promote God. And so that's one way we can look at this because that's what John the Baptist was saying about Jesus. And we can say that about ourselves all the time.

We're pointing to him. We're not trying to promote our own name. I know I prayed that I could be like Stephen Curtis Chapman too.

It made such an impression on me. I've always wanted, if I can just get people to walk away from me thinking about how great God is, I feel like, okay, I've done my job. I'm sure that happens.

And John 1 34 John the Baptist acknowledges that Jesus is the son of God after baptizing him. Why does he seem confused in Luke 7 19 and Matthew 11 13. I imagine this is the place where he's in prison.

I don't have the text in front of me, but. And he says, are you the one or should we look for another. And I think it's very interesting the conversation that happens because what Jesus does is he offers his pedigree.

Tell John this. The blind see the poor are the oppressed are rescued or whatever he gives these these characterizations of supernatural power. And by the way, the oppressed, they are clearly the oppressed of the devil.

Those are the ones that are getting rescued. And not just culturally oppressed, but sometimes people change the meaning there or make it more like a social justice thing. But no, those are the oppressed of the devil.

That's what Peter points out. Jesus rescued people from who are being oppressed. But the point here is that now you've got John the Baptist and he's the one who said Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

So salvation and judgment. So this thing I was going to bring the judgment on the bad guys, all the evil guys, including the evil Romans. Okay, so he has an understanding of how this is going to play out and it ain't working out the way he thought.

Not for John, not for John. He must increase and I must decrease. He didn't realize how much he would decrease because now he's in prison and facing a death sentence, which he ended up.

That's what happened to him. He is beheaded. And so he's having a moment of doubt or a season of doubt.

I really appreciate this passage because in John's case, he has plenty of good reason to

believe that Jesus is the one for the reason he gives earlier on. He said, I wasn't sure, but the father told me this would be assigned the one who I baptize and the Holy Spirit descends upon him. That's the one.

And then he could say, behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. So he had plenty of evidence that Jesus was the one. And plus keep in mind that Jesus and John the Baptist are cousins.

So they had some time before growing up together where they got together. And you remember when John says to Jesus, I should be baptizing. You should be baptizing me, not me, you.

That was before he got the revelation that Jesus was the Messiah. He's referring probably. I think it's a good insight that I got very early.

And someone else gave me early in my Christian life that Jesus was remarkably remarkable, even as a lad and holy. And if anybody didn't need to repent, have a baptism of repentance, John knew it was his cousin Jesus. So John's got lots of information there, plenty.

That doesn't mean he's immune to periods of doubt. And here he is in prison. He said, OMG, this isn't what I signed up for.

I didn't think it was going to turn out like this. Maybe I'm mistaken about something. Are you the one? And Jesus responds with evidential features.

And then he says this. Now I've had somebody say, I heard a sermon on this. He said, Jesus doesn't chastise John for his doubt.

But he does. In a gentle fashion, kind of. He says, and blessed is he who does not stumble over me.

You tell John this, because what was happening? John was stumbling over Jesus, who Jesus was showing himself to be. And it wasn't what John expected. Now there's a lesson here for all of us.

We have, when we become Christians, or when we're raised as Christians, we have a kind of expectation of what the future is going to look like and what we're going to get as Christians, how God is going to be towards us as believers. And generally, this is not an accurate picture. And we learn the hard way that in this world you have tribulation.

Right? So as Jesus pointed out. And we start stumbling because we have a false understanding of what to expect out of being a Christian in a fallen world in this lifetime. And we talk about that a lot on the show.

Give people an accurate understanding. But people still, especially in a very narcissistic

culture, they get it wrong. John got it wrong for a little different reasons.

He wasn't narcissistic, but he was discouraged because now he's in prison. And this isn't what I thought was going to happen. And Jesus said, I'm the guy.

Here's my creds. Don't stumble over me. Don't force fit me into your preconceived notions about how I'm going to do things.

And that also happened in John chapter six, when he did the Bread of Life Discourse and said, eat my flesh, drink my blood. And it grossed a lot of people out and they left. And Jesus said to his disciples, aren't you going to leave? He's not begging them to stay.

But John, make that Peter says for the rest of them, where are we going to go? You have the words that give me total life. So it wasn't as if he really resonated with Jesus sermon. Nevertheless, he knew that Jesus was the Messiah.

So in a certain sense, by contrast to John the Baptist, he's going to hang with Jesus, even though he's confused. All right. And this is the right response.

Don't stumble over me. And so I think what this does is give encouragement to us that Jesus is still the Messiah. Even when things don't go as we expect them to go.

Don't stumble over him. Blessed is he who's not stumbled over me. Here's my grads.

Hang in there. To me, this is so realistic because I mean, anyone who's been a Christian for any amount of time, when things go wrong, that's when you start to say, wait, did I get this wrong? Which again, it doesn't make any sense because we can look at just John the Baptist and know that things aren't going to go right. But that's just the way we think.

We start to doubt when things are going wrong in our lives. So to me, this whole passage rings true. This is what we do as human beings.

You know, he asked, why does he seem confused? Well, why does any of us seem confused? We have all this evidence. We have more evidence than John had, except not maybe not direct revelation from God. But we have all this evidence, and yet we do the same thing.

We start to doubt when things are going wrong. And I always tell people that's when I have to think about something objective. What I think about is the cross.

And I think about how that shows God's wisdom, his sovereignty, his justice, his love, his grace, all these things that I can hang my hat on, regardless of what's happening to me. And that when I think about that objective reality of what's happened, and again, John didn't know what was going to happen at this point, but we do. So we know where everything is heading.

And we know what Jesus was here for. We know what he's doing today. We can look at those objective things and know that whatever's happening is not outside of God's control.

And it's not for a harm. It's for our good in some way. And it's for the good of God's plan.

And so I always have to think about those objective things when I emotionally start to doubt that God loves me or to doubt whatever it is, as we all do. We all do. All right, Greg, anything to add before I close this up? We'll put Amy.

Okay. Thank you. Thank you so much Levi and anonymous.

And us, if we really appreciate hearing from you, send us your question on X with the hashtag SCRS or you can go to our website at STR.org. This is Amy Hall and Greg Coco for Stand to Reason.