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What Is the Hardest Aspect of Christianity to Defend?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Question about the hardest aspect of Christianity to defend.

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Transcript

Welcome to another episode of Stand to Reason's hashtag, STRask Podcast. I'm Amy Hall and I'm here with Greg Koukl. Hello, Greg.

Hi there. Alright, here is a question from Jared. What is the hardest aspect of Christianity to defend? Well, that's a good question.

I've actually thought about that and I think the hardest thing to defend, all of the harder things to defend are theological issues, not apologetic issues. And I think among theological issues is the notion that human beings are held responsible, morally responsible for their actions, culpable for their actions, even though they were born within the world. It's an inclination since the fall to do bad things.

I wish it were the case, I'd feel more comfortable if it were a case that we all were like Adam. In other words, born morally pure, innocent, maybe that's a better word, morally innocent, though we had a capability to disobey or obey, which is the nature of moral freedom. So that's, I feel more comfortable with that.

I don't like the idea that we are all fallen in Adam and making a sense of what that actually means is hard. And there's two characteristic ways of doing it. One is that we were actually in Adam when Adam sinned, and so therefore we are part, we party to that sin.

The second way is to say that Adam acted as a federal head for the human race, much like a president declaring war in another country is declaring war for the population so that the entire population, so to speak, is at war with the total population of the other country. And the federal headship is the thing that accomplishes that. That's the way of

thinking about it that I'm most comfortable with, but even then I'm uncomfortable with it.

So that I think is the hardest one. It relates to the issue of the nature of moral freedom and culpability. I have noticed in the Bible though, if you look at the Mosaic Law, there are sacrifices that are provided for the Jews for sins they didn't know they committed.

They're called presumptuous sins, I think. And that seems odd. What it does seem to do is to change a kind of moral equation that seems to make sense to us that ought implies can.

You only ought to do something that you were able to do. And if you're not able to do it, then you can't be held responsible for not doing it. That doesn't seem to be a biblically sound equation.

Because we are held responsible for the sins we commit, even though fallen in Christ, rather fallen in Adam, it is not possible for us not to sin after the fall in the Latin non-passing on the car. It's not possible not to sin. And we are all sinners then by nature is the way Paul describes it.

And that's problematic for me. I think it's true because Scripture reveals it to us. And it's not just the case that we are all sinners like incidentally.

We just happen to sin and therefore we hold responsible for it. Instead, we are sinners by nature and therefore we sin. We aren't sinners because we sin, we sin because we're sinners.

And that I think is a hard one to go with. And I can't think of anything more difficult than maybe you have a difficult one, but that's the hardest thing for me to deal with. Well, just to comment on one thing you said, because I think sometimes when people hear that we're not able to do something, they assume we're not responsible, but that's only when it comes to if you're not physically able.

So someone is restraining you, you want to do what's right, and someone is physically restraining you or you're not capable of it because, like no one would say a person in a wheelchair is guilty for not standing up. No one would say that, but there's something different about your soul being unable to do something because now it's who you are. Now it's something that's, you know, for the same reason that God is admirable because he's not able to sin because he's perfect.

We are blameworthy because we're not able to be perfect because that is who we are. And it doesn't entirely satisfy me even that because the fact that we are morally in spiritual, morally incapable of obeying is due to someone else's error that befalls me after a fashion. Now, that's probably not a precise enough way to put it.

Adam and Eve broke God's law, became spiritually dead, understand rebels to God, and they reproduced substance. Subsequently, after their own kind. Okay, so that means everybody that was born from the fallen Adam and Eve were also fallen in the same way in rebellion against God by nature.

Okay, and another way of maybe characterizing what you just said is it's not that they're not able to do it. They are not willing to obey. Now, the lack of will or the will to oppose God is a characteristic of the fallen nature.

So that's where I feel uncomfortable, but it doesn't mean I don't believe it. I do believe it because it's very clear in scripture and to go out to deny that reality puts you on par with people that are pretty much out of the pale of the reservation. Specifically, in terms of historical theology, this would be Pelagius, who Augustine opposed in the fourth century, and Pelagius denied original sin and therefore had a different characterization of salvation and biblical anthropology, the doctrine of man.

And so that would be the alternative, which I don't think a sound. Nevertheless, I'm still uncomfortable with it. We've talked about this illustration before that helps me to make sense of it.

In the Lord of the Rings, there was a hybrid creature that was created by Sauron and his minions called a Heurokai. And Heurokai, I think, was a cross between a goblin and an orc. And that was a pretty ferocious thing that wasn't afraid of light.

And so they come out at daytime and they're really big and strong. And they came out of the womb as it were. People remember the film, Peter Jackson's characterization of this at Isengard.

They come out of the womb, which is kind of a mud womb, adults and nasty and mean and ready to kill whoever they could reach. And that happened in one instance. They kind of the one helping with the birth as they come out of the mouth gets throttled by Heurokai.

In other words, these guys were born bad. And we know that. They're born bad.

They're really bad. We need to kill these guys. So this is a way of eliminating someone who had no choice about being the kind of creature it was, but still it was bad.

Nonetheless, it had to be dealt with. So that's what I draw on as a fictional analog to help me understand maybe somehow the way human beings are culpable for their behaviors, even though they're born bad. Because we all intuitively know that they are culpable.

And so we can apply that to our situation. That's right. That's the parallel.

Yeah. Well, this question, what's the hardest aspect to defend? I think there are different

ways to take this. So you could be asking, what's the hardest for me to defend or for anyone to defend? Or you could be asking, is it hard to make the case or is it hard to persuade someone of the case? Good distinctions.

So sometimes there are things you can defend intellectually, but they're very hard to understand. And so I think the things that are the hardest to defend are the things that you cannot understand if you hate God. And specifically what I'm thinking of here is the idea that when we're talking about suffering, why would God allow suffering? Well, if it's the case that knowing God is worth suffering, then that makes sense.

But if you don't think God's worth it, I could explain to you what's happening. But it's not really going to make sense to you because you assume God's not worth it. On the way in here, I was actually listening to an interview that Elisa Childress was doing with John Eric Sintana.

And John Eric Sintana was saying that she was so thankful for the pain. She's in chronic pain, but she says she presses into that because she knows that through that she will become closer to Jesus. She'll know him better and she'll just experience his closeness to him or she'll have a better relationship with him and all that.

And then she said, it's very hard to convince people of this. She says, you can't understand it unless you go through it. And I say even further, you can't understand it if you don't think God is worth it.

So if there's an instance where there's an aspect of theology, and again, I agree with you, Greg, it's the theology that's harder to convince people of. If it depends on you seeing God as he is and you're in rebellion, it's going to be very hard to persuade that person. So what I try and do in those situations is say, look, I understand that you don't see God this way, but here's how I see it.

So my goal is just to help them to understand how I'm seeing it. And maybe God will use that in the future and open their eyes and help them to see him. So what I say will make sense in the future, but my goal is just to help them to understand how I'm seeing it and say, you know, I know you don't see God this way, but if God were this way, this would make sense.

Well, this underscores another element of resolving these kinds of difficulties. And I mentioned this in the story of reality that you cannot assess one worldview from the values that are inherent to an opposite worldview. Since what's in question here is which worldview is the accurate one? If you work from your values of your worldview, you are going to not going to make any sense of a different kind of world.

Okay. So this is like Christopher Hitchens debating. Is it Jay Richards? Yeah, I got Stephen Jay Gould in my head and I couldn't get past him.

It's totally different guy, obviously, but Jay Richards. And when he asked Jay Richards if Jay believed in a resurrection, then Jay affirmed it as a classical Christian, Chris Hitchens thought, well, you know, there I rest my case. Why? Because resurrections don't happen.

Well, resurrections don't happen in your worldview, but they happen in Jay Richards's worldview. And so what you're doing is judging Richardson's worldview by standards of your worldview when the whole debate is about which worldview is true. It all depends on what kind of world you're living in.

If you live in a magic world, which in a sense is the way the Christian worldview is, there's supernatural things that happen. Well, then you're going to, then these things are entirely plausible. They were implausible from the perspective of the opposing worldview.

And this is why Johnny Tada said, you know, or actually you said, I think it was your point. She said it's really hard to do, I think, or something to that effect. Yes, she said it's hard to convince people.

It's hard to convince people. And the reason is because they keep assessing from their perspective of their own worldview instead of asking the question, which worldview is actually correct. Once you answer that foundational question, all these other things fall into place as plausible.

You may need to add more things to make them believable as actual, but they're certainly plausible in a supernatural, miraculous kind of world. But not in a non-Christian materialistic world. They're not even plausible there.

But that's why the question is, what kind of world do we live in? And I see people combining worldviews like this all the time. Another example would be, so what I just said about suffering and trying to understand is God worth it. Well, what they'll say is, no, this God randomly kills people or just commits genocide.

And so they're coming at it from their perspective rather than looking at how the Bible explains the destruction of the Canaanites as judgment. And God is good. They said, come at it from the idea that God is bad.

And then they can't make sense of these other things because they're not looking at Christianity as a whole. They're just taking their perceptions. Another one they'll do is say, well, Moses was just manipulating people.

And so therefore all these things that happen were bad. Well, you can't combine the two worldviews and try and make sense of it that way. It will never make sense if you try and do it that way.

You have to look at it what it's claiming and then evaluate that. Yeah, Lewis also talked

about chronological snobbery where we assess the morality of an ancient world or ancient peoples based on the more enlightened standards that we have now. Okay, you can't expect them to have the same standards we have now in many cases because the standards we have are ones we've developed over a long period of time.

What's odd for me is not only will people do this, they'll say, well slavery is wrong. And therefore what they see in the Old Testament, they word slavery and they say that must be wrong too. There's a misunderstanding actually of what's going on in the Old Testament, but that aside, notice how they're making a moral judgment based on their, the picture of slavery they have in their own mind, which is the American system.

And when in fact, not only was it different, but it was a, it's an attempt to put your values on something that happened thousands of years ago. And it also is making a moral assessment which people who are relativists have no right to do intellectually. So they'll pronounce their own relativism and defense of their own latitude, liberty, autonomy, but then adopt a moral objectivist view in order to condemn the God of the Bible.

Well, I'm going to cheat a little bit and I'm going to add a second thing. Although if you change what I said a little bit and make it more general, instead of saying the things you can't understand if you hate God, I would say the things you can't understand if you don't want to understand. Because the second thing I would say is it's very hard to defend an idea in Christianity if the culture is pressuring people to reject it.

So any ideas about sexuality, I can explain to you why, why God is against certain as certain ways of expressing sexuality. And I can even use non-biblical ways that we've talked about before. How do you defend these ideas without using the Bible? Just by looking at our bodies and looking at how we operate and how human beings flourish, we can answer that question.

But because people are being pressured to reject that and accept this other perspective, it is very hard to persuade people that, that what you're saying is reasonable or good. So I don't know if you have any thoughts on that. No, I think you're right.

There's a multiplicity of factors in play here. And that is huge. That is huge.

Because what the culture is pressuring people to do or to think is consistent with their fallen desires. So they're getting as cheered on, so to speak. And this is what Paul says in the end of chapter 1 of Romans, not only do they do these things, but they give hearty approval to those who do them.

I think I just want to add one last thing to this. Because when we're talking about things that are difficult to defend, especially if we're talking about things that people will hate you for if you say them, they're going to call you names. And they're going to laugh at you.

They're going to make fun of you like Christopher Hitchens or like people who don't want to hear what you have to say about sexuality. You know, somebody was asking me about this at the reality conference that we had not long ago in Minneapolis. How do you deal with the pushback? And I thought about this a lot, but one thing I want to say right now is there's something, there's something supernatural that happens when you defend Christianity in the face of hatred and mockery.

And it's something, this goes back to what John Erickson Donna said, I don't know that I can convince you that's true until you try it. But when you are standing calmly and willingly speaking the truth without hedging what you're saying, but just speaking the truth in love and you're being mocked for it, there's something supernatural that happens. There's a kind of a sense of well done or a sense of comfort that I get that I can't really explain.

And I've experienced this more than once and maybe you've experienced this too, but just because something is hard to defend, I encourage you, even if you don't think they're going to understand it, I encourage you to speak the truth just clearly as you can and let God do with it what he will. He might not do anything right then, but he might do something in the future. Well, there's always this temptation to sanitize God and make him look like a good old boy kind of thing according to the standards of the culture.

And that's a big mistake and I remember we had Justin Briarly on the Earth, my program not too long ago. And in his book, he's talking about significant intellectuals who are moving, drifting almost towards Christianity because they realize the secular viewpoint just gives you no foundation to stand on for the kind of values, the things that we are good, that we think are good. And so one of the things one of these writers said is I want Christianity to be weird.

I want you to stay weird. He said, a lot of Christians are trying to be more like me in their views and stuff adopting these things, progressive Christians. Oh, Justin Briarly, that's what you said.

Yeah. I can't remember if you said Justin Taylor, I just heard Justin. Oh, I'm not sure.

I could be the one wrong here. No, no, Justin Briarly on the air and his new book about the, which I can't remember the title because it's like the amazing resurgence of belief in God or something to that effect. But it really stood out for me that this non-Christian wants Christians to stay weird, okay? That is, look unusual to the world.

Instead of trying to accommodate in all these areas, be like the world, he wants them to, instead of the Christians wanting to be like him, he wants Christians to back at him to be like them, essentially. But it shows that a very interesting concept. I'm glad he said that because it shows that there is an appeal to the transcendent moralistic elements of Christianity rather than just going along with the crowd.

This identifies a kind of radical distinction. The gospel and the Christian worldview are radical to the culture. That's a good thing.

And when people try to accommodate the culture and they drift away from classical Christianity, they become less and less appealing. It's his point. Because secularism and all the values that fall from secularism, atheism, they are unsatisfying.

It's a huge theme in Justin Briarly's book. And we talked about it on the program and people might want to listen to it if they haven't heard it. The self is not adequate to ground identity, meaning, purpose, all those other things.

It's just like falling through empty space. And what these folks that are moving towards Christianity have been saying is that it's Christianity that is consistent with the things that I really believe are valuable. And so they're realizing in their atheism, there is no justification or foundation or grounding for all these values that are actually a result of the robust Christian worldview.

And that's why one of them, Tom Holland, I think calls himself an atheist Christian because he doesn't believe in God, but he realizes all the things that he holds to be valuable are things that Christianity has delivered to Western civilization. Well, thank you, Jared, for the great question that you managed to use up the whole show, but that was a great question. I don't think we've ever been asked that before, so thank you for that.

And please send us your question on Twitter with the hashtag STRS or go to our website at str.org. We look forward to hearing from you. This is Amy Hall in Great Cople for Stand to Reason.