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How Would You “Take the Roof Off” a Denial of Objective Beauty?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether it's possible to go your whole life without sinning, why God put the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden, and how to “take the roof off” the claim that beauty is not objective.

- * Does Romans 9:11 lead to the conclusion that it's possible to go your whole life without sinning if you try hard enough?
- * Why would God put the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden in the first place?
- * How would you “take the roof off” the claim that beauty is not objective?

Transcript

[Music] This is Stand to Reason's #STRask podcast. I'm Amy Hall and I'm here with Greg Koukl to answer your questions. Today, Greg, welcome.

Hi, Amy. In the last episode, we were talking about sin. I actually had another somewhat kind of follow-up question.

I'm just going to continue on that topic right now. We took the whole episode of Responding to Jordan. The reason is this issue is so central to being a satisfied Christian.

If you are laboring under the law as a Christian and you're looking at the things you aren't doing right, and this causes you to doubt your salvation. And by the way, I think that there is a sense in which that can be applied, but it's usually not going to be applied to the person who is trusting Christ and is concerned about his sin. I'm sealing your fire here a little bit, Amy, because I know we talked about it during the... But even if people are concerned about that, that shows that they're concerned about that, and that's an evidence of the Holy Spirit in their life.

It's only in my understanding of the text. It's only in the context of having a very rich sense of your safety in Christ that you can trust him to move forward and seek to live a holy life. If what you're doing is to try to seek to live a holy life, to keep yourself saved, you will never do it because you will never, even as I mentioned earlier in the other episode, even begin to fulfill the two greatest commandments that Jesus talked about.

Anyway, I just jumped in and making the bridge here from last show to this one, but you have some more questions on this, right? I do, but just following on what you just said, Greg, not only is it important to understand sin and the Christian life and sanctification because we need to have a right understanding of grace, but on the flip side of that, it's also important to understand sin and sanctification because God's purpose for us is to make us like Christ. So this is actually something we should be thinking about and pursuing to the idea of killing our sin. So we need to get this right and we need to understand how this works and how and what grace means and all those sorts of things.

So Greg, it looks like we're coming back to the rutabagas. This one is from rutabagas are bad. Okay.

And rutabagas are bad asks, is it possible to go your whole life without sinning? How can I respond to someone using Romans 9 11 to claim that since babies haven't yet done anything wrong, we too can go our whole lives without sin if we try hard enough. Let me just read, let me just read Romans 9 11 just to get us this. It says, for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad so that God's purpose, according to his choice would stand not because of works, but because of him who calls.

Well, the attempt here is to raise an issue by comparing the sinlessness of children of babies to the circumstances of adults. It's just a false comparison. Children are not capable or certainly babies are not capable of exercising their wills for good or for evil because their physical capabilities have not developed enough so that these mental capacities can be actualized.

All right, let me say that again a little differently because you might people might be wondering what the heck is he talking about. Our souls have capacities. We have the capacity for, let's say, of learning to play the piano.

But a two year old or a one year old may have that capacity, that capability there in their souls to be expressed, their physical body is not of the place where they can play the piano and their mind can manage notes and all that, all the stuff that goes along with that. That requires physical development. And so there are all these capacities which includes a capacity for moral behavior, which requires understanding the difference between right or wrong and then, and then having a will that is capable of choosing the good and eschewing the bad for moral responsibility, for behavior to make any sense for that individual, to be applied to that individual.

But when you have adults, all of those things are in play. We are fallen, but the capacities that our soul has now can be expressed appropriately through our physical capabilities given our development. So comparing babies and their incapacity or their inability of sinning, though they have the capacity to do that, they are incapable because they have not developed enough physically for that capacity to be manifest in their behavior to compare that to an adult or anyone who has moved into their moral, what's the into the circumstances where their moral capacities are developed.

This is a wrong kind of comparison. By the way, Isaiah 7, there's this verse there, and this is the passage where it talks about the virgin giving birth. It says before the child has the ability to determine right from wrong something to that effect.

And so there's an acknowledgement there of this capacity that is there, but that takes time to manifest itself in development, physical development. So this, I think this is just a wrong kind of comparison, Amy. Yeah, I agree, Greg, that's, I think you've hit the nail on the head right here.

The idea here, and I think if you're responding to someone about this, is you have to get to the idea of our being fallen because if Greg is right, and I think he is, that the only problem here is that the babies don't have the physical capability of sending. It's not that they don't want to. I mean, it's not, I mean, they're not thinking in terms of that anyway, but their hearts are broken already.

They're already fallen. And I think that's where you probably have to take this because it sounds like that's where this person is disagreeing with you because I don't think it follows from this passage. And by the way, who is more self centered than a child, you know, young one? Now it's understandable in a certain sense, because they depend for others, but we don't expect them to be selfless.

It's just not in their ability to manage that. But what we do is as soon as possible, we begin training them otherwise. We begin speaking to that developing expressive capacity that capacity begins to express itself, that moral capacity so that they begin to make choices that are consistent with the good and inconsistent with the bad.

That's part, that's what we do with kids. And we continue all the time we're doing that. And then of course that process never ends until we die.

Mm hmm. Well, in light of all this talk about sin, this brings us to a question from Kyle. Why would God put the tree in the garden to start with? Well, this is a good question.

It's a fair question. And the way I characterize it in the story of reality, and by the way, there's a, there is a, this is a kind of a judgment call. It isn't like we have clear characterizations of this in Scripture.

It's all explained. Certain things are explained rather clearly. Other things are just there

and we kind of scratch our heads and we wonder.

Okay. But I think characteristically, the reflections on that issue amount to there is nothing in a certain sense inherent about the fruit of that tree itself. But it was inherent, what was, what was meaningful was the act towards God regarding a prohibition up until that time there was moral innocence.

All right. There wasn't in a deep sense moral purity. There wasn't like an immutable moral goodness.

That would be what God has and that he, he then in my view at least in Amy's view, he, he delivers to us at the resurrection. So it's a communicable attribute and we be, we become holy by nature at the resurrection. Adam and Eve weren't holy by nature.

They were holy by practice. In other words, it was a possible for them to sin and it was possible for them not to sin. All right.

As what happened though is when they ate from the tree, then they disobeyed God. And in the story of reality, what I, the way I characterize this is that it was a, it was a, an opportunity, a way that they could express fidelity to God. All right.

It's hard to express fidelity and faithfulness to someone when you are not tested in that faithfulness, making a choice in favor of that one as opposed to something else. And I was thinking about this notion the other day, you know, we have friends that, that we love. All right.

I'm just, just thinking of spousal relationships. Okay. Spousal relationships have lots of liabilities to them, obviously, because you're living together and just always brings out the best and worst of us.

But, but we may have friends that, that love us, but, but that love has never been tested because it never cost them anything in many cases. So for the friend that loves the spouse, in question, how many times is that, that friend of theirs, the spouse, injured the friend who loves them? Oh, they've never done anything wrong. They've already been great.

Well, see, then your love hasn't cost you that much. It isn't, I'm not saying it's not real love, it just hasn't cost you. But the spouse who continues to love when they've been injured, that love costs something.

Okay. That is a greater love. And, and so the, the, the, the testing of the love or the opportunity for testing is what in a certain sense secures the meaningfulness of it.

And it may be that something like that was going on in the garden, this is a test of fidelity, of faithfulness to a, to the king, to the sovereign. And of course they failed the

test. And that made a mess of things.

They got themselves into a heap of trouble and us as well. But I don't know, that would be my, my response. I actually do think the tree of life, my suspicion is had some inherent quality that God gave it to give life.

But I don't think the tree of the knowledge of good and evil had an inherent quality of being destructive. I think the thing that was destructive was the disobedience, not the nature of the fruit that was eaten. Mm hmm.

And Greg, I agree with you that God often reveals hearts through people's actions. So, I think about Hebrews 11, where it talks about, and not Hebrews, well Hebrews 11 also talks about this. But when James talks about our actions revealing the truth about our hearts.

So we see Abraham and we see that he gave the actions of faith, which was following God when doing what God told him to do, these actions revealed his trust in God. So, if they had not eaten from the tree, that would have revealed and shown to all that they trusted God, that God was worthy of trust, all of these things. That's what they should have done.

Obviously, especially in the face of temptation. In other words, if they just casually didn't eat of it, then, okay, well, that's good. But if they're tempted, and then they have to make a decision, no, God said, no, we're going to obey God.

And that was the circumstance they did face the temptation. And like you said, Greg, there is some speculation in this. But one thing we have to keep in mind as we're thinking about it is the fact that God knew they would fall.

And we know this because he talks about Jesus, his plan to die for us on the cross, being before the foundation of the world. So that was not a surprise. So whatever the tree was meant to do, it is in light of God's overall plan that he had laid out where Jesus would die for us on the cross.

So I think there are a lot of things to think about here. And I think you've given some good things to think about, Greg. Thank you.

All right, let's go to a question from Michael. Taking the roof off someone denying objective moral duties and obligations is pretty straightforward. How would you take the roof off when objective beauty is denied? Well, I have a funny anecdote because that actually happened to me in a debate once.

But let me explain for those who may not be familiar with the concept of what taking the roof off is. It's a tactic in the tactics book that I actually developed. I got the name for from Francis Shafer.

It's really a version of what is often called a reductio or reductio ad absurdum where you take a person's view and you follow it out consistently and you show how it leads to an absurd consequence. So if you if you follow it consistently and end up in that place, you probably started from the wrong place. There's something wrong with the view itself.

All right. So in the case of morality, if the reductio is, oh, well, morals are just relative. They're just a matter of individual opinion.

Well, if that's the case, then the problem of evil is reduced to a matter of just personal preferences. Those things are evil because you don't like them. So I can't believe in God because they're Brussels sprouts, right? Because I don't think Brussels sprouts are I think they're disgusting.

But nevertheless, that doesn't seem to be a good argument against God. But that's what the argument against God amounts to if morals are not objective. And they're just a matter of personal preferences.

Okay, that's taking the roof off with regards to morality. Now the question about beauty. I think that the way we are know that morality is objective is because we have a capacity to see that.

Okay, these are called moral intuitions. We have a number of intuitions and intuitions are way of knowing something and they're very, very foundational. It's a way of knowing something that you don't know how you know it.

It's direct. It's not built up from one thing to another. It's direct.

And so we develop this understanding of morality. What no, sorry, we develop an awareness of morality that is built into us. And as we're capable of trafficking in that world, as we grow, that capacity becomes more manifest.

We talked about this before. But the justification for it isn't just our subjective feelings. It's an awareness of something we see in the real world, but we don't see them with physical eyes because morality is not physical.

But it is evidenced by the common complaint, the universal complaint, and acknowledgement, there's something is wrong. Something is wrong with the world. And the thing that's wrong with the world is moral.

This is what people are complaining about when they raise the problem of evil. Okay. So I think morality, like rationality, rational categories are functions of intuition, knowledge that are built into our souls.

Right? I think beauty is the same thing. Now there is a subjective quality of beauty. I understand that.

That there's some people, they say beauty is in the eye of beholder. I said, well, I think in some measure, that's true. But there seems to be a standard of what is beautiful that goes beyond just personal preferences, like symmetry.

If you talk about physical beauty, symmetry is something that creates that that is evidence of beauty, physical beauty. Okay. And so you look at people's faces or whatever, you know, there is certain kinds of symmetry that is part of that.

And other people analyze this, but you don't need to know the why in order to know that we behold beauty and we acknowledge it and we recognize it. Some have characterized beauty as goodness in physical form. All right.

And just driving through Malibu Canyon this morning, as I usually do on my way to work and along the ocean route from Malibu to Santa Monica, I'm beholding beauty. I love that route. It takes me longer to drive it, but it's beautiful.

It's objectively so. And I think we understand that. So I am going to appeal to the objective reality of beauty simply on the basis of intuition.

I can't make an argument for it. You either see it or you don't. If I said that if a equals B and B equals C , then a equals C , and somebody said, no, it doesn't.

Well, I don't know what to say that I can't make an argument. I'm displaying what amounts to a transitive quality right there, or maybe this law of identity or something, but these are rational concepts that you ought to get if you get understand what's being said. And by the same token, if you don't get that something is beautiful by looking at it, you don't see that that's beautiful.

Then I don't know what to say to a person. All right. Now, I understand there are different notions of beauty.

You could have somebody who's not physically beautiful, but appears beautiful to the one who loves that person. That's a different element entirely. But we're talking here now just about, I think the question is about physical beauty.

So I chuckled when you asked the question, so let me give my illustration, and then I'll let you respond here, Amy, with your thoughts on this. And I was actually doing a debate in Canada. University of Calgary, I'm trying to think of the professor I was debating against, but the nature of the debate was about the issue of objective morality.

And he believed all more morality was relativistic. There was no objective morality. Of course, I was holding to the objectivist view, and that's the nature of the debate.

But what was curious is that this professor as her name was John, I can't remember his last name, but in any event, what Professor John tried to do with the audience is he tried

to use beauty as an illustration. That in the same way that beauty is completely subjective, and the way he characterized it, is he said, we subjectively here now smear beauty on the thing we're looking at. That is, the notion of beauty is completely internal, completely subjective, and we push it onto the thing that is being described as beautiful.

And he says morality is the same way. Now, I think this was ridiculous strategy. As if everybody believes that beauty is completely subjective, that we smear it on, and so then he could use that as a jumping board into understanding how morality is the same way.

I think it was, I don't think it was, I know it was completely and effectual, because the atheists who sponsored the event came up to be an apologized for the performance of the professor defending moral relativism, all right? And that's true, they did that. Now, here's the key though. That was on a Saturday evening, and the next morning I was preaching at a church that had sponsored the event.

And so I'm just about ready to be introduced to do the sermon, and I'm thinking in my mind about what happened the night before, and something occurred to me that broke me up. I'm in there trying to hold my laughter down while I'm being introduced, as I think about the comment that Professor John made the night before, because what I could have done after he made that claim about smearing beauty on the thing we call beautiful, I could have said or I could have asked, I wouldn't have done this because it would have been in politics, but I could have asked Professor, I understand your take here on beauty and that's smeared on. I just have a question, have you ever told your wife that she was beautiful? And if you have, were you faithful to make clear your meaning that you're not saying anything about her, you're talking about something you're smearing on her? So Amy's grinning at this.

I don't know if you've ever heard that story before with me, but that's true story. I did not say that, but I'm thinking about it the next morning in church, and I'm trying to hold back my chuckles as I'm being introduced to do this sermon. But I think that the point here is, yes, beauty is objectively an objective feature of the universe and it's something we behold and it is self-presenting.

And if you try to characterize it as completely subjective, it becomes clear that this has foolish consequences. And so in a sense, my little joke in my mind that Sunday morning was, and what I could have said, but wouldn't, even if I thought about it then, although it made some points, it would have made some points at his expense. So I wouldn't have done that probably.

It is an example of taking the roof off with regards to beauty. And I like what you said, Greg, about are just, we behold it and we see it and you can certainly show people pictures. Are you telling me this is beautiful in the same way this is beautiful and you can have two different things? I was thinking also about, you know, there's some modern art

that is, you know, somebody smearing dung on something or something like that.

But even in that case, nobody's calling that beautiful. They're calling it transgressive or insightful or some other word. Yeah, but they're not actually calling it beautiful because we know that it is not beautiful.

So I think everybody has these categories. And sometimes we do need to learn, we need to educate ourselves to understand certain things and understand the beauty of them. That's true about anything.

Yeah, it used to be that art, part of the essence of art was to create something beautiful. And historically, that's been the case until the 60s. That's when really took off.

I mean, there were examples contrary to that early 20th century, probably mostly early 20th century. And you have all kinds of other characterizations of beauty that went from expressionism to then you know, you think of the way. Oh, what's this name? Nude is sending a staircase.

What is that guy? Cubist and here. Picasso? Yeah, Picasso. So all of these, then you start thinking, hey, well, that's not beautiful.

But what these are are revolts. These are philosophical revolts against a certain understanding of the nature of reality. And so when you get to the 60s, you have who is a Frank Zapper or whatever.

I mean, this guy, all he did is make his music was just noise, right? It's just a bunch of noise. And it was a rebellion against these, the objectivist standards. So the art became a means of expressing rebellion instead of a means of expressing beauty.

And so the significant change in the last 50 years. And that's why you see these ridiculous characters, these money that's spent on these things. And you've, you OMG, right? Oh my gosh, what the heck is that? You know, because there's no, there's no beauty.

So you can have, you know, a guy put a crucifix in a glass of urine. All right, this was part of the expression, but the title of it was "Piss Christ." And this was National Endowment for the Arts paid for that. And it's a big deal because it was an artistic expression.

All it was was grotesque rebellion. Nothing beautiful. And I doubt anyone called it beautiful at the time.

Well, some would think a beautiful in a different sense as a beautiful expression of rebellion, but the thing did not have beauty in itself. What it represented they saw as, oh, that's, it's great that somebody is radically dissing something sacred, but it wasn't looking at it. One would say that is, wow, transcendent.

Well, thanks for the great questions. Rude Begg is our bad. And Kyle and Michael, we appreciate hearing from you.

We want to hear from you. So send us your question on Twitter with the hashtag #STRAsk. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cocle for Stand to Reason.

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