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How Could Someone in the Old Testament Have Believed without First Being Regenerated?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about how someone in the Old Testament could have believed without first being regenerated and why the devil would need to blind anyone (as referred to in 2 Corinthians 4:3-4) if total depravity is true and people already aren't able to choose God on their own.

* How could someone in the Old Testament (or any time period) have believed without first being regenerated?

* If total depravity is true in the sense of people being hardened and not being able to choose God without being changed prior to conversion, then why would the devil need to blind anyone as it says in 2 Corinthians 4:3-4?

Transcript

#STRask How Could Someone in the Old Testament Have Believed without First Being Regenerated? I'm Amy Hall, I'm here with Greg Koukl and we welcome you to the #STRask podcast. Alright Greg, you ready for the first question? I am. Okay, this one comes from Brian Reiner.

I respect Greg's response about Old Testament believers not being regenerated but do not agree nor do others like Al Moller, Robert Godfrey. How can one of any time period believe without regeneration, John 3-3? Jesus appeared to think Nicodemus should know this from the Old Testament. Okay, let me, I want to take this in reverse just to kind of clear the Nicodemus thing away.

Jesus was talking to Nicodemus about the work of the Spirit, okay? A person cannot enter into the Kingdom of God unless he is born again, alright? Born of the Spirit, not just of water which I take as a reference to physical birth but there must be a spiritual birth to enter into the Kingdom. Now there was no sense that Old Testament believers had that the Kingdom was currently in place and that they would enter into the Kingdom by any

means at all except for the Messiah coming. So Jesus wasn't referring to, okay, you know about being in the Kingdom and of course you can only be in the Kingdom if you have the Holy Spirit so if you're in the Kingdom you have the Holy Spirit how come you don't know about these things? I don't think that's what Jesus was saying at all.

It doesn't fit the circumstances. The Kingdom in the sense that Jesus was referring to it or at least people expected was Messianic and it was in the future and then Jesus was saying now I'm here and I'm bringing the Kingdom but the Kingdom is different than what you expect, okay? And there are different elements of it. There's a physical element in the future, there's a spiritual element now so he's re-instructing them and then he says that it is by the Spirit that you enter into the Kingdom born again.

He didn't understand this and the reason that Jesus chastised him is because he is the teacher of Israel, in other words Jesus' words, he should have understood this kind of thing. What kind of thing? That the old covenant was coming to an end Jeremiah and a new covenant was going to be in place that included the giving of the Holy Spirit Ezekiel. So Jewish prophets had prophesied a change was coming and any scholar of Scripture ought to have understood this.

Yet Nicodemus seemed to be clueless and when Jesus is talking about born of the Spirit and this surprised Jesus. So I think the chastisement there was not that he didn't understand what was available to all believers in the Old Testament but rather that this teacher of Israel should have understood these more refined things that is the nature of the new covenant that would come after when in the future when God would do the things that were described by Jeremiah in chapter 31 and 31 and following. That would be 31 verse 31 and following.

So I think that's the best way to understand the conversation with Nicodemus. I don't think Jesus was referring to Old Testament regeneration. I have no reason to believe that.

No one can understand the kingdom. The people didn't think they were in the kingdom at the time. The kingdom was to come and that's what Jesus said.

Here I am. The kingdom of God is in hand. Okay, that's the first thing.

Second thing is the question about Old Testament believers not being regenerated. The New Testament, you know, Elmolar was mentioned in Robert Godfrey. These are very impressive people theologically but they're both reformed and the Reformation view characteristically is that regeneration comes before salvation or becomes before faith in Christ.

I mean, there's a logical order there. There is a kind of a whole package but you can't believe unless you're regenerated. And so if people believed and were saved in the Old

Testament, I guess the thinking goes they must have been regenerated then too.

Now, I don't hold the view that you have to be regenerated in the New Testament sense before you can believe. I think God has to do something decisive but I'm not convinced that's regeneration and the reason is because regeneration entails a remaking of our insides so to speak spiritually in virtue of the reception of the Holy Spirit that transform our nature. Okay, that happens when we are in Christ.

Second Corinthians what five anyone if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature. Old things have passed away. New things have come.

What marks Pentecost as a significant date is because that's the inauguration. It might be common as a cent. It seems to me that is the inauguration of the new covenant period.

New covenant is the giving of the Holy Spirit. So even though there was a Holy Spirit in play in very important ways coming upon special people in the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit became the permanent internal personal possession of every justified believer. Having believed, says in Ephesians, you received the Holy Spirit of promise.

So it strikes me that there is a temporal order there that first of all the giving of the Holy Spirit in that special way was a feature of the new covenant which had not come yet in the Old Testament times. That's why it's called the Old Testament. This is called the New Testament.

The new covenant, the special provision was a unique relationship with the Holy Spirit and that would be a permanent possession that would in virtue of the possession of the Spirit, we would be transformed on the inside and regenerated and made into new people in which the law is written on our hearts and not just written in tablets of stone. Now as to the necessity of some decisive determinant of work of God to bring people to faith, I agree with that. I agree with that because this is what Scripture teaches very clearly and incidentally that's not a unique feature of Calvinistic or Reformed theology.

That is a feature of all New Testament theology, Armenian or Reformed, the need for a decisive act of God. The exception would be as if you're a Pelagian and denied the role of original sin in people's lives of setting them up from birth as rebels against God. But my reading of Romans 3, for example, which is a quotation from the Old Testament by Paul makes it pretty clear to me that everybody is really lost.

The question between Armenians and Calvinists is what is the particular way the grace of God works to make salvation possible for people who are ingrained in their rebellion and also lost by captivity to the devil. It's all worked together. So that's the distinction.

What I'm saying here is not Calvinistic theology. It's biblical theology, the Reformed versus Armenian elements kind of come in later. But everybody agrees that human

beings are lost and they need some act of God to in a sense bring them to a point where they have the capability of trusting in Christ.

So what happened in the Old Testament? God worked in some unique way to overcome native sin in our hearts and bring us to a place where we could believe in that general statement should apply to Armenians and Reformed. How he does that and how far he takes people is it. That's a difference.

So the views I have are not unusual. I guess Al-Molar and Bob Godfrey are just committed to this notion of regeneration must be in place for anyone to believe. I don't accept that.

And therefore it must have happened in the Old Testament. But I see no evidence of that other than that kind of theological presupposition being imposed in Old Testament texts. I don't see any internal evidence theologically of that in Old Testament scriptures.

The coming on, the anointing of the spirit in certain cases, kings, prophets, or those people who were involved in building the temple and making beautiful things. Yes, unique thing. People believing? Yes.

How could they do that if they're so fallen? God had to work in some fashion. But regeneration is a very unique feature of the new covenant which wasn't inaugurated until Pentecost. That would be my take on this.

Right. We are new creations in Christ. So there's something different about what's happening now.

And if you just think about what Jesus said about John the Baptist, he said the person who's least in the kingdom of God is greater than John the Baptist. Why? Because John the Baptist was under the old covenant. That's good point.

So there's something, there's something definitely different about what's happening now. Otherwise, these other passages wouldn't make sense. But I agree with you, Greg, that even in that case, there was something God had to do in their hearts so that they would believe.

And I think that's where all of all of these people would agree where I agree with you. The extent to which God changes people and what that means, I'm not entirely sure what that means. I think that this passage in 1 Corinthians 2 talks about how a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God for their foolishness to him.

And he cannot understand them because they are spiritually appraised. So there is something that happens but that God initiates. But there's something different now from the old covenant.

And so I don't know how else to define that except to say that the new creation happens in Christ. And there was not that new creation in the old covenant. Right.

Right. It wasn't a feature of it. And I don't, I don't want to, what it seems to me to artificially impose a feature of the new covenant onto old covenant people when there's not justification unless, or maybe because there is just a kind of a somewhat peculiar doctrine you hold about regeneration and faith in the New Testament.

And so you, you know, almost compelled to export it to the Old Testament. But I don't think that's necessary to accomplish what reform people want to affirm given the fall in this of human beings. All right, Greg, let's go to a question from Sean Spencer.

If total depravity is true in the sense of people being hardened and cannot choose God unless regeneration happens prior to conversion, then how does 2 Corinthians 4, 3, and 4 make any sense? The devil wouldn't need to blind anyone because from birth, people are unable to choose God according to Calvinism. Thanks. Okay.

Well, this is an interesting question and clarification is necessary. And that is that, notice how you said according to Calvinism, the idea that human beings are blind from birth to the gospel, or I should say are, are set against God from birth, given that they were, they were conceived in a fallen state. And Adam's condition was transferred to them.

He reproduced after his own kind. And so given that when he started reproducing with Eve, they were both fallen and they were both under judgment. They reproduced offspring in the same set of circumstances.

They didn't, they didn't produce offspring that were, were morally neutral or morally innocent. All right. That's not Calvinistic theology.

That's Christian theology. And the alternative to that is Pelagianism. And of course, Pelagius was a heretic of the fourth century that that Augustine had a lot of interaction with.

So that, that is not that, that's part of classical Christian theology. Now there may be some people that deviate from some details of that, but characteristically, this is considered orthodoxy. Pelagianism, or even semi Pelagianism is considered, well, Pelagianism is considered off the reservation.

And semi Pelagianism is may not be heretical, but it's considered heterodox. Okay. And so it's standard for, for believers than to hold just across the board, regardless of their, their other theological commitments to hold this fallenness.

Now the question then becomes well, then what role does the blindness Satan, uh, imposes on them, um, have an incidentally total depravity does, is a, um, is sometimes an unfortunate term. It's easy to misunderstand. It was characterized here.

Could you read the way he characterized it? Um, he, he just says, uh, let's see, if total depravity is true in the sense of people being hardened and cannot choose God unless regeneration happens prior to conversion. Okay. So well, that regeneration prior to conversion is, is another mood issue between us.

I mean, we may have different points, but we talked about that a little bit earlier. Certainly God must do something. Okay.

To overcome the blindness and overcome the rebellion. All right. Um, but a total of poverty, I don't think that's a, you know, a kind of a fair characterization.

What, what totally private is is that every human being is, is, is influenced by sin in every area of their life. Okay. There's nothing that's not influenced and that would include the will.

Okay. The will is influenced in, in a sense that it is set now. It is inclined against God.

That's the impact of the fall on the area of the will. So there's some similarity by what he's saying there, but I'm just saying so-called total depravity is broader. It doesn't mean that human beings are as bad as they can be.

It means that there's no area that's not influenced by the fall. The, the, the, the depravity is extensive. It's, it's extensively total.

It's not intensively total. Maybe it's another way of putting it. All right.

So, so what this means then is that, um, that, uh, people in a fallen nature have their will inclined against God. Well, what about the devil? Okay. I want you to think about, um, 2 Corinthians chapter, uh, two, I think it says there was a deluding influence that God brings upon the people because they did not love the truth.

Okay. Second thessalonians. Second.

Oh yeah. Thank you. Second thessalonians.

Right. Okay. Now notice what's going on there.

There's a description of human beings. They do not love the truth. So they are vulnerable to lies.

They do not love the truth. Why? Because they're fallen. Their will is inclined against God.

They want something for themselves, personal autonomy, their own truth, not God's truth. Okay. That makes them vulnerable to lies.

What is the chief weapon of the devil? It is in power. It's lies. He's a liar from the

beginning.

The truth is not in him. And because people are, are, are not lovers of the truth because of their fallenness, they are vulnerable to the lies of the devil, which lies they believe. And as a result, the devil holds them in his power.

All right. So there is a relationship, a kinship, if you will, a hand in glove enterprise going on here where the fallen human beings rebel against God. And then the devil comes along and feeds the fire by giving them lies that they're willing to believe because they don't love truth.

And when they believe the lies, the devil tells them they become captive by him to do his will. Their eyes are blinded, no to the truth. And so there's that kinship there where one begins and the other ends.

It's that's hard to tell, but they go together. Remember, John warned Christians about three enemies, the world, the flesh and the devil. Okay.

They all cooperate. The flesh is our rebellion. The devil is his rebellion expressed in lying to rebellious people who don't believe the truth, which creates a world of people like that that are appealing to people who want their own thing and not God's thing.

So you see, all of those things that are operating together, which become huge obstacles to evangelism. And this is why no duh God has to act. And again, that's orthodoxy.

That's not Calvinism. That's orthodoxy, how he acts and how much he acts and how thoroughly he acts are going to be different based on people's differing theological convictions. But that he must act in the sight of human native rebellion and the deception of the devil.

That's clear New Testament teaching. What we have to do here is look at all the different elements that are taught and then find a way to fit them together. So as you pointed out, Greg, these are things that are clear.

We're born, we're by nature, children of wrath. We're a held captive by the devil to do his will. He blinds us.

That's first Timothy, second Timothy chapter two, just so people are going to look it up. Yes. And we know that like we said earlier, the natural man does not accept the things of God.

First Corinthians two. Right. So we have all these things.

So we know that we are born in rebellion against God. Jesus also says no one comes to be unless the father draws him. John six.

So you put all of these things together and then you work out how they work together. I don't see why there's any problem with saying that part of how they are trapped is because of the blinding of the devil. We are by nature children of wrath and we are also blinded by the devil.

Like you said, Greg, he still steps in and he does this and he feeds this. So I think these are all working together. I don't think they're in conflict.

I just thought of an illustration. Think of people who are given to want to get rich quick. So that's their own motivation.

They want to make a lot of money fast. All right. People who are mostly motivated by that are vulnerable to scams.

Then you got a scammer that comes in and scams them with a lie and they buy the lie and what happens now they're captive to this lie. But they got themselves. Excuse me, in a certain sense, they got themselves into it.

They were they were dispositionally open, vulnerable to it. And then they bought the lie and then they and they suffer as a result. So there's a good illustration of seeing how two different things can be operating together and still be distinct.

Yeah, just think about it. If someone is able to see God as he is, there's nothing the devil can say that will confuse you about that. So and if he can't see God as he is, then of course, all of his lies will be fallen into.

All right. Well, thank you, Brian. Thank you, Sean.

We are done with another episode, Greg. That one went really fast. Yeah, sure.

Thanks for listening. This is Amy Hall and Greg Koko for Stand to Reason. Thank you.