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Can a Christian Pretend to Denounce His Faith to Save His Life?

January 30, 2025



#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether pretending to denounce your faith to save your life will cause you to lose your salvation, whether lying to save others' lives is comparable to lying about your faith to save yourself, and advice for someone struggling with crippling intellectual doubts.

- * Can a Christian pretend to denounce his faith to save his life so that he can continue to live his life for God, or will he lose his salvation?
- * If lying to save others' lives is acceptable, is denying your faith to save yourself or your family acceptable when you don't mean it?
- * Do you have any advice for someone struggling with crippling intellectual doubts?

Transcript

This is Amy Hall, and I'm here with Greg Koukl. You're listening to Stand to Reason's hashtag, S-T-R-S, podcast. Right.

You ready for the first question, Greg? All right, this one comes from George. Faced with death if they do not denounce their faith, can a Christian pretend to denounce in order to get out of the situation? Can they then carry on living their life? I forgot and not have their family, et cetera, lose them and also maintain their salvation? Tension between Matthew 1033 and also Matthew 2675? Yeah, the verse is just for reference now. Matthew 1033, Jesus, is speaking about confessing before men, and he who does, he will confess them before the Father, but he who denies me before men, I will also deny him before my Father who is in heaven.

Now, turns out, Peter denied Christ. That's the second reference, Matthew 2675, and there talks about Peter denying him, and he weeps bitterly. And so you do have this occasion where you have a denial and a retraction.

Now, in the case of Peter, that was a different set of circumstances than what George described in his question. He was describing somebody who is appearing to deny Christ for the sake of

saving their life or maybe saving the lives of others in their family. Did I catch that right? Yeah.

So, there was actually a store controversy about this. Actually, he says, not, I guess this would be just to save your own life. Okay.

Well, there was a controversy about this back in the 4th century. For those, Diocletian was the emperor just before Constantine, who then made the Edict of Milan made religions, all religions, legal, including Christianity, so the persecution ended. But a lot of Christians before that had kind of buckled and then returned to a public proclamation of their faith.

And the question was, can these receive communion? And so there was a controversy about that. I don't, and there were differences of opinion, but it seems, look, I think that Jesus' statement in Matthew 10, those who denied before the Father, I will deny, is kind of with, I think it's maybe like in the final analysis is what I'd want to say. Obviously, Peter denied people, denied Christ before men.

Yet his, he was heart was broken as a result and he was repentant and anguish, deeply anguished about it. It's interesting how Jesus describes it. He tells Peter that he is going to be sifted like wheat.

And he also says, you're going to deny me. He's going to be sifted by Satan, but I have prayed for you so you will stand. And he didn't stand in the initial case.

He denied, right? And, but he returned to Christ. And so I think what that demonstrates, even in this kind of circumstance, there is grace. In Peter's case, you know, I think he might have been a little bit concerned for his life.

It's hard to know. I mean, Jesus was on his way to execution. It seemed inevitable.

And so Peter, you know, knew the risks, but it wasn't like his life was immediately being required. If you confess Christ right now, we will kill you. And this has been the case for many martyrs in the past.

I think that he was just, he was fearful and anticipating the problem. Didn't want to be associated with Jesus. It was too risky.

And so he denied Christ. In other words, it's a little bit of a less of a challenge or a circumstance less pressing than what was just described here by George. Nevertheless, he returned.

And obviously was still saved. Okay. And so I think that that is open to the Christian who in a moment of weakness and not and fearing martyrdom or maybe even fearing the way his family is going to be treated.

That's another issue wasn't part of the question that they're saying, okay, I'm going to deny Christ. No, I would never recommend that no matter what the cost. And part of the reason is we have statements like this by Jesus and we have a history of the Christians, the apostles and the

disciples and the Christians that followed are being unwilling to recant even at the cost of their own life.

Now, the question is, if that happens, can they come back? And I think the answer is yes. But it's agreed and egregious sin to do that. The only thing I'm somewhat more sympathetic to.

Look, if I had to face that situation, my confidence is in Christ, but my palms had sweat. I mean, this would be a, it's hard. The thing I'm more sympathetic to is when it's not you, but it's your children or your family is going to be.

And maybe the family isn't even participating. You know, so it's not their choice. It's your choice whether they live or die kind of thing.

But I think the sin is forgivable. And I'm not sure what conclusion the early church came to on the communion bed, but I know there's controversy about it. But nevertheless, I think that we want to stand for Christ.

But if we sin by not in certain circumstances, the sin is forgivable, but we need to come back and confess it before man. Yeah, it's, it's clear that Peter knew he had sinned. He went away weeping bitterly.

So it was a sin. I think kind of a trail of his, of his, his, close friend, et cetera. I think this is really serious.

So, of course, there are, there are two questions here. Can you lose your salvation? No, you can't lose your salvation. God will forgive.

But can you do that in order to save your life? If that's part of this question, then I would say no, you should not do that. There's no pattern in the Bible. I don't think there's a, there's no example of the Bible of anyone ever denying God in an attempt to do something else.

Because in order to do that, that other thing has to be greater than what you're doing. Yeah. But there's, there's nothing.

There's denying God is the worst thing you can do. I mean, practically, I mean, I can't. I think you should get a bend ago.

Even the Old Testament or the New Testament, you have a continuous voice. Right. Right.

So you don't want to, there's, there's nothing greater that you would sacrifice that for. You don't sacrifice your, your covenant with God for anything else, because it's the highest thing. Like you said, I don't think that's easy.

Yeah. And I pray that I will always stand up for Jesus because I think we fail all the time in little things. We do all the time.

But I can't help but think about Rod Dreyer's book, *Live Not By Lies*, because he tells all these stories about these Christians who lived in communist countries. And his, he made this point that the Christians were always better off, not denouncing, even if it meant their kids didn't go to college or didn't have the advantages that they would have had. And he looks at their lives and he says, look what, look what happened.

The people who refused to denounce and lived in poverty or had all these disadvantages, they actually ended up being better off in all sorts of more important ways than just having their child go to school. So I think what we need to think about is what is the most important thing here is, of course they're talking about life. So that makes it this harder, but we probably won't face anything like that.

But we might someday face something like you can't go to certain college if you're a Christian or whatever. Well, look at some Christians were captured during the attack on Israel. I mean, I mean, some Americans were, I don't know if they're a Christian or not, but, but so it's certainly possible if you're traveling in another country that you might face that kind of thing.

Yeah. So I think you just need to be, I think it was Richard Wormbrand who was telling students at one point, you have to decide right now. Yeah.

Decide right now what, what is most important to you is your relationship with God, your covenant with God more important to you and honoring that and glorifying God more important than anything else, having a house, not even just having a nice house, having a house, going to school, having all these other things, you have to decide so that you're ready when the time comes and you have to make a choice. And you're always better off obeying God and honoring him than not, even if it doesn't feel like it in the moment. And this is where we have to work at building up our trust in God.

And that happens by looking at what he's done in the Bible and in history. And there are all sorts of stories about people. And we've been in our own lives as we look back.

Yeah. Okay. So the second question goes along with this grade.

This was George too. No, this comes from Mark. Oh, I see.

And we've, I think we've said a lot so far, but you might have something to add. If lying to save others is acceptable is denying your faith acceptable to save yourself or your family when you don't mean it. Well, it feels to me like we've covered that ground already, but when you have a moral dilemma, if you don't don't have a sense of a hierarchy of moral values, that is some things are more moral than others.

Some things are greater goods than others. If you don't have a hierarchy, if your view is that all sin is exactly the same. Some people say that.

I don't think they, if they were to think about it, they'd really believe that. But in any event, if

that's their view, you can't solve a moral dilemma. You can't, you're between a rock and a hard place.

You either do A or B and both of them are wrong. So which one do you choose? You got to choose one of them. That's the nature of a moral dilemma.

The only way you can get out of the dilemma is choose the, you could either characterize as a lesser evil or the greater good. Okay, but that still requires an assessment. All right.

So that brings us to this question. What is the greater good in these circumstances? If you are simply lying to save a life, saving the life is the greater good than telling the truth. Okay.

If you are lying to avoid your own martyrdom, which means you are denying Christ, well, the greater good in that circumstance is to be faithful to Christ. And so the, let's say it's a lie in both cases, but the alternative is entirely different. And because the alternative is different morally weighted, you still are obliged to do the greater good.

And the greater good is always to be faithful to Christ. Now, if you're not, is that forgivable? Of course it is. Think of this.

If the blood of Christ is meant to cancel out sin, how can sin cancel out the blood of Christ, which is stronger the blood of Christ to the sin? If the sin is stronger, we're all in a bad spot. We're all in trouble, but no, the blood of Christ is stronger and is capable of covering all sin. Now, what happens sometimes is when people are threatened with loss, even loss of life because they're Christian, a lot of them abandon their Christian testimony because they're not Christian.

In other words, whatever Christianity meant to them, it wasn't so deeply ingrained and fully committed to Christ that they were willing to stick with it under oppressive circumstances in the midst of oppressive circumstances. And that can happen here, and it does happen. Jesus talked about this.

The cares of the world. We talked about the parable of the sower, and it chokes out the plant. Or difficulties come, the sun comes in, no root, and so the plant dies away.

So there's a lot of indication that when hard times come and people abandon Christ, they left us, John said, because they were not with us. And Peter talks about in 1 Peter about the trials we go through proving our faith. They burn out all those other things in our life and show that our faith is worth more than gold to us.

So when we stand firm, that's what we're showing. So I agree with you, Greg. This is not the same category as just a lie.

This is a much greater sin, which is going against the very purpose for which we were created. We were created to honor and glorify God. So if we go against that, that's way worse than just

saying, I don't know where the person's hiding, which would be a lie if you're trying to save someone's life.

Now, maybe someone will say here, well, if I can just be forgiven, then I'll just do that. And that's where I would just direct you to Romans 6, because that's exactly the question Paul addresses. You know, if we're under grace, why not sin? And he explains why, because we are new creations who died and rose with Christ.

We are now new creations. We are living for God. We are giving our bodies for righteousness and life and beauty and goodness.

And we don't just because we're new, we don't just use this idea that we're going to be forgiven to just do whatever we want or to save ourselves some trouble or even save our lives. All right, hopefully most of us will never have to make this decision, but you really don't know. You really don't know.

Well, the ultimate decision, no, but there are smaller ways where we do favor ourselves rather than Christ in public circumstances. And that's something we have to be alert to. Sometimes I think it's in a way easier when it's so clear that, okay, if you deny it's easier to say, I'm not going to deny, then when it's just a little thing and you're just thinking, well, but if you practice with the little things and you pray for help with the big things, I think that's what we have to do.

All right, let's go into a question from summer. I am struggling heavily in my faith. It feels harder and harder every day to believe God exists.

Do you have any advice for someone struggling with crippling intellectual doubts? Yeah, I do have a suggestion and I have talked about this before as a general principal or general. That's the right word. Maneuver, I don't know, but I haven't talked about it enough.

And I think that whenever someone is thinking about abandoning Christianity or theism in general, they have to ask themselves this question. What's the alternative? What's the alternative? When I think about Christianity as a worldview and I was just having this thought the other day, let's say most people, many people maybe aren't like 100% convinced or even Christians who are committed to Christ are still have this like 10% fudge facts not being sure, even though the preponderance of evidence moves you in that direction. So you're trying to be faithful, but there's always this doubt.

That's pretty normal. That's where the question. What's the alternative comes up? Okay.

What's the alternative atheism? Anybody who's thinking about that needs to just get a copy of street smarts and look at the chapter where I begin talking about atheism. And I'll be talking about this in reality in the next reality sequence. The major divide in worldviews is the question of God.

And on the yes side of all kinds of things are wonderful things are possible. On the no side, if

God doesn't exist, it is utter nothingness. It is nihilism.

And this isn't just my view. I mean, it is my view. I mean, I cite in there people like Bertrand Russell, who describes as a famous philosophical atheist, a British 20th century atheist, one of the most famous 20th century atheists.

And he says, look it. I'm trying to remember the phrase that the one of the phrases is the longest quote that I cited there. But it's just like bitter nothingness kind of phraseology, even Richard Dawkins.

He said nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. This is the world that atheism offers because in atheism, all you have is molecules in motion. That's it because the vast majority of atheists are materialists.

The universe is made up of molecules in motion. We don't know how it started, but this is what it is. And it's going to die out.

And we're just what we are. No deep morality. The morality we think we have.

That's just a trick of evolution. That's their answer. And values, well, whatever.

Whatever you value. I value what Christians think are good things, but I guess they'd have to see if somebody else valued what Christian thinks are not good things. It's no different because there is no standard.

And that's where you're left with moral nihilism. What about human purpose? Well, whatever purpose I give. I talk about this as the story of reality.

And incidentally, there's no difference between purposes at that point. You might be by the Theresa. You might be Hitler.

In both cases, they've chosen their purpose. That's the existential move. What you can do is make your decisions for yourself.

Okay. Got it. But that's all there is.

And see, I don't think that human beings. Let me put it. I was going to say can't live this way, but that's too subjective.

What I really mean is human beings know better. They know there's purpose to life. This is why they would talk someone out of a suicide.

They know that there's right or wrong. That's transcendent, which is why we make moral judgments all the time. Francis Schaeffer talks about the moral emotions.

We are built for that. And we have every reason to believe we are built for that because morality is a deep-seated feature of the universe. This is why we complain about the problem of evil.

If you go to atheism, there can be no problem of evil. It's one of the points I make in street smarts. And so what I try to do in that chapter is I try to say, here are the costs.

Here are the costs. And it isn't just like a cost-benefit analysis. Find the one you like best.

These are the metaphysical costs. If you go this direction, this is the world you are left with. Nealism, nothingism, molecules in motion.

That's it. If some form of theism, it would have to be a personal God-theism. That would be theism as opposed to monism, but some form of theism is true.

Then it makes sense of so many other things that seem to be true features of morality. Morality is one of them. And there's a whole host of other things, purpose and dignity and all kinds of human rights, all that.

That are all grounded in a properly grounded. They find a natural place in a theistic worldview. You get rid of God, you have that foundation, no more.

It's gone. Feet firmly planted in mid-air, right? There's nothing there. Do whatever you want.

Maybe that, maybe the original God. But all of these other things are a casualty. And this reminds me of the Justin Breyerley's book.

This is a surprising reaper. The surprising, I always think of the adjective. I can't get it.

The surprising rebirth of belief in God. And in this book, he's chronically atheists who are moving towards theism because they realize everything they believe that's important about the world fits in a theistic worldview and does not fit at all in an atheistic worldview. We see the same thing in the air we breathe, right? In that book.

So anyway, I know you want to jump in here, but my advice is to ask the question when you're doubting the existence of God, for whatever reason, and I'm not saying dismiss the reasons, but whatever reason, you have to ask yourself, what's the alternative? And I'm not suggesting that you choose the alternative that's more tasteful to you, that you like better. I'm asking to think about the alternative that the alternative that comports more with our common sense understanding of the nature of reality. The price that you pay to be an atheist is immense.

In other words, the things that I would have to affirm are the universe came from nothing. Morality is just a trick. There is no problem of evil.

Consciousness brings out of matter. Life came from non-life. I mean, these are all parts of that program.

These are wildly counterintuitive. And this is why as a thoughtful person, atheism has no appeal to me whatsoever. What's the alternative? That is a great overall way to look at this, Greg.

I just have a couple practical tips on top of that, but I think that's really the key. I think what you've just said here. But my first thing would be I would look at where your doubts are coming from.

Maybe you're spending a lot of time. Sometimes people spend a lot of time in apologetics and then they get out there. And then all of a sudden they're engaging tons of atheists and maybe they're just spending a lot of time reading other views.

Now, the problem with some of that is that there are a lot of people out there who use a lot of scorn and insults instead of arguments. But it's very easy to absorb that. And I think maybe even especially for women to absorb that point of view and start to think Christianity doesn't look so plausible now.

But not because they actually gave a reason. It's because of their scorn. It's because of their insults and their mockery.

Those are arguments. So what you want to do is take that out of the equation. So maybe if you've been interacting with people who have been arguing that way, then just stay away from them for a while.

That doesn't mean you have to ignore actual real questions. It just means take that element out of what you're dealing with right now to see if maybe that is actually a side step. The attitude kind of.

Yeah. And also, you know, again, especially as women, I think we see through other people's eyes and we get into their perspectives. We get very empathetic and we see things from their perspective.

So it's easy to take that on. So just get a little separation. Take one question at a time.

Don't get overwhelmed. It's easy to go from question to question. What about this? What about this? Just give yourself some room.

Take one at a time and start looking at that one and then say, okay, I don't know these others, but that's okay. I'll get to those. I don't.

You can write them down. You can leave them and come back to them later. But just do one at a time.

You don't want to overwhelm yourself. Great point. And then finally, I wonder.

Sometimes people start to doubt God because they have been looking at all these intellectual things. And they start to wonder, okay, well, where's the experience of God? And the reason why is they've gotten away from actually interacting with God. It's gotten it's moved into the point where it's all about thinking and questions and looking at God through a microscope or whatever it is abstract.

Yeah. And you've actually really just kind of walked away from him. It's like if I had a good friend and then I suddenly stopped talking to that friend and maybe I started talking to other people about the friend, but I never actually talked to that friend.

You start to feel some distance. So if this is coming from a place where you're questioning because of your experience, then I would say keep reading your Bible, keep praying to the extent that you're able to. But especially just keep reading your Bible, keep thinking, shaping your mind, keeping your mind grounded in the perspective of the truth.

And that's something I pray for all the time. Help me see things the way you see them and not be swayed by other people's perspectives. Eligitimately.

So what you want to do is shape your mind with the Bible, slow down on answering your questions and just take a breather and just keep going. Gary Habermas wrote a book called the Thomas Factor that talks about the different kinds of doubts and ways that you can approach those. And that's available online at his website.

If you just look up the Thomas Factor, you can find it for free on his website. And so those are all things I think could be helpful. Incidentally, C.S. Lewis said, sometimes when he thinks about Christianity, it seems so implausible to him.

And then he reminds himself that when he thinks about, when he used to think about atheism, it also seems so implausible. So having a season where you're thinking, well, that's really, that was 2000 years ago. You know, that all matters now.

And it seems so implausible. Well, what's the alternative? Yes. Well, thank you.

Summer and Mark and George. We appreciate hearing from you. And we hope to hear from you with your questions soon.

This is Amy Hall and Greg Coco for Stand to Reason.