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Would the Gospel Be Good News if Hell Didn't Exist?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether the gospel would be good news if Hell didn't exist and what to say to someone who responds to evidence for Christianity by saying, "The Bible's bad for society," and doesn't seem to be interested in the evidence.

* Would the gospel be good news if Hell didn't exist?

* What should I say to someone who responds to the evidence I offer for the truth of Christianity by saying, "The Bible's bad for society," and doesn't seem to be interested in the evidence?

Transcript

(upbeat music) (bell dings) - I'm Amy Hall and welcome to the podcast where I ask Greg Cokele your questions that you send us on Twitter and through our website. And then we-- - We struggle to say something useful to the wonderful questions that get sent to us, so great. So here's the first question from Jackson.

Would the gospel be good news if hell didn't exist? - I'm thinking of the options, you know, the impulse is to say, no, but depending on what's theology, hell isn't the only bad news for people who are not forgiven. Okay, in fact, there are a lot of people who believe in annihilationism. And ironically, they believe about the afterlife, the same thing that atheists happily believe, that you die and then there's nothing.

It's over with, you're annihilated, you go out of existence and the ceasing of existence is the punishment for whatever moral crimes that you're responsible for, okay? Now you guys don't know this, but Amy just sneezed and I have never heard such a quiet sneeze in my whole life. Oh my goodness, that was good. - So much for trying to go under the radar.

- Yeah, there you go. And I never sneezed into my arm like you did. Most people do that, but I have very strong sneezes and that just creates a mess, so I don't do that.

Nice job, okay. So the presumption would be, well, then the gospel of good news, because good news saves you from hell. But I think we can be broader and say that the good news saves us from punishment.

And punishment could be hell, classical view, our view, biblical view, or it could be ceasing to exist. That's what Jehovah's Witnesses believe, for example. Now there may be a time of judgment in which God says, okay, you're guilty, goodbye, you're gone, okay? And then you cease to exist, so you have to endure the judgment in which you are kind of eternally executed, so to speak, capital punishment like an eternal basis.

And so I guess one could say that would be a punishment. And the good news is that you will be saved from that punishment, okay? But if universalism is true, that is everybody gets saved one way or another, then the gospel, but I guess the gospel would still be good news in that regard because on that take, no one ultimately faces eternal punishment. Now there might be temporal punishment that they face, and then eventually are led into heaven.

That's a possibility. And then the gospel would be good news because the gospel provides for that eventual release from a cease and a punishment. But I guess the answer is, yeah, it could be good news under those characterizations.

But if no one is ever held responsible for anything and there is no consequence to sin at all because God is a loving God who would never judge anybody, this is the way a lot of people think about it. Jesus isn't a factor in there. Then it isn't good news that Jesus saves us for sin because we don't need someone to save us from our sin.

We are not held responsible for it. So I think under that set of circumstances, the gospel couldn't be good news. But under all those other circumstances, that Jesus did something to rescue us still applies in some manner.

The question is whether it applies in the accurate manner, because if you don't get this right, you might think that people are safe who are not safe from the wrath of God. And Jesus himself said in John three, we think of John three, oh, that wonderful passage of God so loved the world, keep reading. Men love darkness rather than the light because their deeds are evil.

He who believes is not judge. He is not believe has been judged already. He who does not believe the wrath of God abides on him.

That's all in the same chapter. And all that follows John three, 16. So if we take Jesus seriously at face value in statements like that, then the gospel is good news only for those who put their trust in Christ.

And it's, and all the bad news that makes the gospel good news, all the bad news applies to those who don't because they don't benefit from the rescue that the good news

heralds. - There's so many ways to take this question. And it's hard, it's hard to answer without knowing exactly.

This is partly why I thought this would be an interesting question because there are so many ways to take the question and then to answer it. Because it's unclear to me if they're saying, if it's annihilationism, is that of hell or if it's if there's no hell, is it good news? But one thing I want to point out here to keep in mind is that ultimately the good news is about the reconciliation with God, that's the ultimate goal. So even if, let's say it's the case that there's no hell, but we just live on this earth forever where there's sin and without God.

So even in that, if that were the case and there was no hell, it's still good news that you're gonna be reconciled to God that you can be with him. Now, if there, if by no hell you mean there's never any consequence, well, now I'm not sure it is good news because that means God is not just. And if God's not just, I don't know that it's good news you're gonna be reconciled to him because he's not a good God.

- Right, interesting. - So I think there are a lot of things to think about here and we just need to keep in mind that ultimately, however you look at this question, our goal is to be reconciled to God. And that's even more important than being rescued from hell and being rescued from punishment, even though that's obviously good news for that too, but the goal is to be with God.

And so I think however you're asking this question and the answer, I think that's an important thing to keep in mind because sometimes people, they go to the carrots and sticks thing and it's all about fear. - That's right, I was thinking about that with our atheist caller on the regular show who made that charge, it's all about carrots and sticks. - Yeah, because it is good news that we avoid hell, but that's not the best part of the news.

That just means you avoid hell, but the good news is we're reconciled. - Well, I remember that conversation and a part of it where he said, you know, where he asked the question, would you still believe in Jesus? It was something like this if there was no threat of hell or something like that. And would you still be, and I said, look, if there was no fall to be saved from, I'd still, then it doesn't make any sense to be saved.

'Cause there's nothing to be saved from. But that I would still want to be with Jesus. - But you would be if there was no fall.

- Yeah, and this was the part that was not factored in to his understanding. It's kind of a truncated understanding of Christianity. You take one little piece of it, when you take that piece of it and you see that as the whole, everything goes out of kilter.

- All right, let's take a-- - But by the way, just thinking of John 17, this is eternal life, to

know God. I think he says to know God and Jesus Christ, whom he have sent. But it's the relational element that is the substance of eternal life, John 17.

I think verse three. - Yeah, and even a little bit earlier when he's talking to the disciples and saying he's going away and they're very concerned. And he says, don't worry, I prepare a place for you so that where I am, you may be.

It's not just that they want a place. It's that they want to be with him. That's their highest goal.

- Here's John 17, three. And this is eternal life that you escape from hell. Hang on, do whatever you want afterwards.

No, no, here he says, this is eternal life that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. By the way, I'm realizing, he says, I'm looking at different passages that I'm seeing more and more passages that make it clear that inclusivism is false, okay? And this is one of them. Inclusivism is the idea held by the Roman Catholic Church and others know that Jesus is necessary for salvation but you don't have to believe in Jesus.

You can follow your own religion and God will apply the blood of Christ to your life, and they call this anonymous Christians. There are all kinds of problems with that. But look at this, this is eternal life that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

And by the way, he's speaking in the third person of himself. He is Jesus Christ, but it's interesting the focus there. Not me whom you have sent, but know Jesus the Messiah.

And if people don't know the only true God or Jesus the Messiah, if they don't know them, there is no eternal life. Anyway, just, no extra charge, I thought I threw that in. - Well, and you mentioned another possibility, Greg, the idea that if there's no fault, there's no need to be saved.

So there was no good news because we're still with God in that situation. All right, let's go on to a question from Trent Blake. Recently, I presented the minimal facts argument to a coworker who likes to discuss religion, but he replied, "The Bible's bad for society.

"When I bring evidence, he responds "as if I'm saying Christianity is good. "Evidence doesn't seem to matter to him. "How do I proceed?" - Well, if evidence doesn't matter to him, then it's clear that his resistance is not rational.

Okay, what I mean is there's some other motivation, and I've talked characteristically about four different motivations that people have or reasons, whatever, to resist the gospel. One is rational. This thing doesn't make sense.

Then when you make it make sense to them, you show them it does make sense. If that's the problem, then they abandon that objection. They might have some other ones, but at least they're willing to abandon that objection.

There are other circumstances where this isn't the problem. The problem is maybe emotional. They've had bad experiences with the church, and so they can't think good about the church, Christianity, or maybe they can't become Christians as some will say because that would mean that they're loved ones that have already passed away, are not with God, and they're being punished for their sins, and they can't countenance that, and so they can't acknowledge Christ.

Now, so there's an emotional reason to resist. I don't know in this person's case what the problem is. If you make the case for the resurrection, and he's willing to say maybe in principle, okay, maybe Jesus rose from the dead, but God isn't good.

Christianity isn't good. Incidentally, that's two different things. So I'm wondering, although this is not an unusual complaint nowadays, what does he mean that Christianity isn't good? And my suspicion is that you guys are homophobic and transphobic and Islamophobic, and all of these kind of phobias that seem to follow from Christianity.

Now, part of the, I think, challenge that we have nowadays in light of these kinds of objections, Christianity's not good, your God is not good. It doesn't matter if he exists or not. It doesn't matter if Jesus rose from the dead, irrelevant.

If we can't do whatever we want, especially sexually, then that's not good. Okay, now you see there's something totally different there. There is a kind of a narcissistic self-centered demand for personal autonomy, and the only thing that's good is if people get to live the way they want to live.

That's their definition of goodness. You do you. It's expressive individualism, and we've talked about that before.

So I think that's a really tough nut to crack. It's kind of like how do you get through to a person who is completely rebellious against the truth because they won't bend the knee, they refuse to do that. Okay, what? Those people aren't reachable.

I mean, this would be my conclusion unless something else happens in the life of God, reaches them, Jesus ran into all kinds of people like that. Think about John chapter 11 and Lazarus being raised from the dead, and here's Lazarus raised from the dead and the Jews, knowing that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, decided they wanted to kill Jesus. We got to kill this guy.

He keeps doing these incredible miracles, and he gets this following. We got to kill this guy, but they not only plotted to kill Jesus, they also plotted to kill Lazarus. It's in the

next chapter.

Wait a minute. He's the walking, breathing testimony that Jesus is who he claims to be. Don't you get it? No, they did it.

It's unbelievable, unbelievable. They have to kill Lazarus too. And from what I could tell, God could do anything you want in anybody's life, obviously.

But in this, the course that these people are on is that they're going to deny every piece of reasonable evidence, not deny it. They're going to disregard it. It does not matter.

Here's what makes them tick. I want what I want when I want it. And that's all that matters to me.

Okay, you're going to get what you want, when you want, how you want it, for a brief period of your existence, and then you're going to get nothing you want for the rest of eternity. In fact, you're going to get a whole bunch of stuff you don't want, but that's your trade. - So as I look at this question, I think what might be part of this, and I think it plays into everything that you're saying here, but I think what's key here, he says in response to the facts, he says the Bible's bad for society, which indicates he's got pragmatic reasons for rejecting the Bible.

And then when Trent says, when I bring evidence, he responds as if I'm saying Christianity is good, as if he's responding to the pragmatic argument, to me what that says is that this guy does not understand the claim that we're making. I mean, it could be that he's purposefully not understanding the claim we're making, or it could be that he has just been so catechized by society to think of religion in a certain way, that he's not hearing the argument you're making. And so that's why he's responding as if you're making a pragmatic argument when you're making a truth argument.

So maybe one way to proceed would be to say that, it doesn't seem like evidence matters to you, and that's really interesting to me because I just wonder what your view of religion is. What do you-- - Or a Christian religion. - Well, no, I just mean religion in general.

- Okay. - Is it something that, is there a truth about religion, like an objective truth, like there's a table sitting here and we're in a building and there's objective truth about reality, of spiritual reality, or is it your belief that we find things that help us get through life and make the world a better place? And that's our goal, just to pick certain ideas that make us feel good and make the world a better place. 'Cause those are two very different views.

And if he's thinking that you're making a pragmatic argument, then I think this could definitely be where he is missing the boat. So before you even make arguments for truth, you need to help him to understand that that's the kind of argument you're

making. 'Cause he's not hearing you that you're making an argument for truth.

So if you can help him to understand that you're talking about objective spiritual reality and that you think there is one and that we need to find it, and then you make your case, then at least he might understand better what the claim that you're making. That's a good point and that had not occurred to me. I did think of this though, when he made the comment about Christianity is not good for society.

A series of questions. Is slavery good for society? No, who stopped slavery on balance? Well, it was Christians who stopped slavery. Is education and literacy good for society for the world? Yes, who is responsible for literacy in the world? It turns out it's Christian.

Christian missionaries that went all around the world and translated languages so people can read the Bible. Now, he might not like the idea that people read the Bible, but the point is this is how people learn to read and got their languages in a form that could be used in commerce and things like that. I have two books at home.

The first one that I recall the name of is called Under the Influence because it's the easy to remember name and talks about the impact of Christianity on culture and societies and whatever. There's another one that's like that. I just can't remember the name right now.

I'm not sure if Rodney Stark has written something along this line or not 'cause he's an historian, but maybe one of the books is by Stark. But the point they're making is when you look back historically, you see whatever salutary impact was made on culture, it was made largely by Christians living out in a Christian worldview. And incidentally, this includes the whole enterprise of science, the whole enterprise of science.

And it was burned in Western civilization, principally Western Europe. And because of their understanding of the nature of reality as committed theists, okay? And actually as committed Christians, although if you, some don't like Newton doesn't pass the theological test on every single Orthodox Christian idea like the Trinity. Nevertheless, they were part of that Christian worldview that then was the foundation for even a scientific method.

So if the question is Christianity is bad for culture, historically that has not been the case. Now, somebody can point to things like the Crusades, okay? Or religious wars or something like that. It is interesting to me that they gotta go back like 500 years or 1000 years in the case of the Crusades or the inquisitions to crab about things Christians did.

But what's interesting to me, and this needs to be taken into consideration is when Christians act like Christians. In other words, when they do Christianity instead of some corrupted form of it, and that's easy to see based on what Jesus taught and what the New Testament teaches, then great things happen. When people who call themselves

Christians do bad things, it's because they're not following the rules.

- Yeah, that's a good way to put it, Greg. I was also reminded, and I just looked this up because I wrote about a study that was done. There was a study back in 2012 where a sociologist named Robert Woodberry, he published a study about what effect missionaries had on the world.

And what he found, if you wanna look for my post, it's called The True Story of Christian Missionaries, and you can find-- - At STR.org. - At STR.org, so you can find it through there. But what he found is that it was the missionaries who were actually preaching the gospel, not the ones who just went there to do good things, but specifically the ones who were actually preaching the Bible who made the big difference. And here's what he said.

It says, "It's research supported this sweeping claim. " Areas where Protestant missionaries had a significant "presence in the past are on average, "more economically developed today, "with comparatively better health, "lower infant mortality, lower corruption, "greater literacy, higher educational attainment, "especially for women, and more robust membership "and non-governmental associations." So if you're looking for this research, and he's got an article, you can look up the article, I have a link there in the post, but the idea is it was because directly the Bible, it was not just because they were going there, trying to do good things for them. In those areas, they didn't have as big of an impact.

So-- - There you go. - I wouldn't start with this because you don't want him to think of this as a pragmatic thing. I would start with the true thing.

But once he understands that, then I would take it here because the evidence is very clear of the great influence. Another one would be J. Warner Wallace's book, "Person of Interest." - That's right. - And he talks about all the ways that Jesus has influenced society.

- Yeah, that's right. And he goes into detail, quite a bit of detail, on the scientific things as well, in that one. - All right, that's all we have time for today.

Thank you, Jackson. Thank you, Trent. We love hearing from you.

Send us your question on Twitter with the hashtag #SDRasker. Go through our website on our podcast page, and we look forward to hearing from you. This is Amy Hall and Greg Kockel for "Stand to Reason." (bell dings)

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