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If God Is Love, Why Did He Kill so Many People in the Old Testament?

January 16, 2023



#STRask - Stand to Reason

Question about why God killed so many people in the Old Testament if he's a God of love.

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Transcript

[Music] Welcome to Stand to Reason's #STRask podcast with Amy Hall and Greg Koukl. I'm Amy Hall and with me is Greg Koukl. And I'm Greg Koukl.

Hey Greg. Alright, this first question comes from Rachel. I have a question that my grandma frequently asks and I don't know how to answer her.

The question is, if God is love, how can he kill so many people in the Old Testament? Okay, there's a couple of factors going on here and I'm glad this question was asked. The first factor is that when we say God is love, I mean this is going to sound a little technical, but when I cast it out a little bit people will see, oh yeah, I get that. The word is has actually five different definitions, especially philosophically, you know.

So you can say Greg Koukl is the president of Stand to Reason. So that in other words, everything that's true about Greg Koukl is true about the president of Stand to Reason. That's called the I am identical, the first is identical to the second.

And when things are identical in that sense, not like identical twins, we're using the term differently there, but when they're identical in that sense, there's not two things but one thing. Okay, so everything is true about Greg Koukl is true about the president of Stand to Reason if I is that person. You know, okay, but then you can say Greg Koukl is flesh and bones, body and soul.

So that's a whole and parts kind of is he is composed of these different things. Okay, I'm just going to give those two examples instead of the other three because I don't want to

over complicate, but I just want to say that there are different ways of understanding the word is. All right, and one of those is an is of essential predication.

Okay, Greg Koukl is a human being. Now, that means that there's something essential about my nature that is described by the phrase human being. There can be other human beings, obviously, but if I am, but being human is essential to what I am.

Okay, now all that, all that with that in place, when we say God is love, we are not talking about the is of identity. We aren't saying that love and God are identical to each other, that we are saying that there is a, this is a parts and wholes, so to speak. This is a characteristic of God.

God is the exemplification of love, but he's also the exemplification of other things as well. And probably the best way, and this is the way I developed this particular concept related to this question in the story of reality, is that God's goodness, his moral perfection, is kind of the ground of some of these other things. Why would we think that God is loving? Well, because God's good and a good God is also has the quality of being loving.

That's part of goodness, right? Well, then why would God be so angry and kill all these people for the same reason he's loving because he's good? And being good requires that evil and wickedness be punished. Okay? And so when a person asks this question, there's confusion, it's understandable. There's confusion.

They read in 1 John, that chapter 4 for God is love. Well, if I'm loving people, I'm not going to bring any harm to them. Okay? Yes, that's true, but that presumes that the kind of harm that you're not going to bring to people out of love is the kind of harm that God causes when he judges people justly.

Well, they're harmed. Yeah, they are in one sense, but it's not a harm that is morally culpable. In other words, it's not wrong to harm that way.

It is right. Think about, look, when parents who are good parents discipline their kids, do the kids like it, whether they're, you know, get spanked or they get stand in the corner or they get time out or they get grounded, whatever the discipline is, they don't like it. It's a harm to them subjectively, but it's a good that the parent is doing because the parent is training the child appropriately.

By the way, this is all religious concerns aside. Ordinary folk understand this point. So because an individual feels badly, feels bad or feels pain or discomfort or feels discipline doesn't mean the act that is causing that feeling is itself.

A bad thing. And in fact, it may be a good thing. Indeed, it would be bad if it wasn't done.

Parents who don't discipline their children are doing harm to their children. And when I

see discipline, I think in the broadest sense, it's expressed in different ways. Some people don't believe in spanking.

Okay, but discipline is important for kids by the same, in the same way, by the same token. When God acts to discipline or to punish, he is doing a good thing. Both his love and his justice are grounded in his goodness because God would not be good if he let evil people off scot free, so to speak.

And just think in terms of the government. You know, you have people who do terrible crimes in your community and they catch them and then they release them. What would you say? Well, that's not right.

That's not good. Well, some people say, well, we're a loving government. You know, you're not going to buy that.

Okay, so I think we can appeal to common sense notions about goodness and justice and realize that justice is part of goodness. And it's certainly the case in God. So God has as an essential quality moral perfection.

He is perfectly good. This means love is an expression of that when love is expressed appropriately. You know, I did a talk many years ago titled when love is a lie.

And of course we see a lot of this now. People justify evil based on love. Killing babies is an act of love.

In fact, I don't know if you saw the TikTok or whatever it was, the gal did. It said, this is an act of love. Abortion is an act of love.

And you pro-lifers are on loving. Okay. Well, she was skewed in the way she was defining love, obviously.

And so she didn't want her baby to be adopted by Christians because that would be a cruel thing for the baby. So it's loving to kill the baby. You see, you see how twisted it is when people, when the concept of love is not morally informed, which would be theologically informed when it comes to God.

And then of course we all believe in justice. This is why we complain about the problem of evil because things shouldn't be this way and something should be done about that. And especially we see the rule of law compromised in government, we complain that's not right, all right? Because a just government ought to execute justice.

So in God we have more perfection. We have love being expressed perfectly as it ought to be done, but certainly not at the expense of justice. And this is why the cross is so significant because both when you have guilty people, God can express love through mercy made available through the justice that is accomplished on the cross.

It's like the perfect answer, all right? But God isn't just one thing. God can't be reduced to love. Okay? As if that's it.

He's identical with love or he's got only one essential quality. Lots of people want to do that. And that's because, and I don't think this is true of Rachel, but that's because they don't want to countenance the wrath of God towards them for the things that they do against God's law.

And so then they want to make God all this loving person who just accepts everybody. And that sense of things bleeds out through the culture and we get socialized by that, even though if we look more closely at the text and think more thoroughly about it, we realize, well, that can't be the right way of defining God. That's the way a lot of people do it nowadays.

And there's our verse, first John 4 7 and 8, God is love. And therefore we should love. And if love is perfect acceptance and no justice, then we should have perfect acceptance for us others and never say anybody else is wrong.

Of course, those same people say those who don't love in that way are wrong. So, you can't get away from this. So I think Rachel's question is a really important one because it requires that we think we're carefully about the character of God and the goodness of God, which dictates love properly expressed and justice properly expressed.

And those people that died in the Old Testament, he had the Canaanites killed. All right. I talk about this in more detail in the streets, smarts coming out in June.

He had him killed for a reason for unbelievable debauchery and sin, breaking every commandment imaginable and sacrificing children to demon gods, sometimes by the thousands. God shouldn't act there. No.

In fact, if Richard Dawkins had been present to watch these children being emulated like that through sacrifice to Molek, burned alive, he would say, how could there be a God who allows this kind of evil to happen? Okay. So even atheists have an instinct of justice and the propriety of God acting if there is a God. So I think all of these things come into play in this question.

That's where I was going to start, Greg, that when you do have people, I agree that most people will say, well, think of love as being all accepting. However, I do think there is a sense that people have about justice, even when they will say that it's loving to let people do whatever they want. If you can hit on whatever issue they really care about, then they see, they can see the truth of the need for justice.

I'm thinking about a case that happened. I don't know how many years ago it was. It was in the last 10 years, maybe more recent, but there was a student, a male student who had raped a girl.

While she was, I think she was incapacitated in some way. And the judge let them off with like, I don't know, a very short amount of time of punishment. Very lenient.

And people were up in arms. Why? Because they understand the goodness of justice and they understand the evil of injustice and of not bringing about justice when that is your job. And so one thing that I think people forget are the roles of God.

They forget about the roles of God. Our O-L-E-S, is that the roles? So you have the creator of the universe who is the ultimate authority over everyone, the ultimate authority. And when we think about the government, we think about the government's requirement of punishing those who do evil.

We understand that. We understand that concept. So if you understand that that is one of God's roles as the creator of the universe, then it makes a lot more sense.

And by the way, it wasn't just people in the Old Testament he killed. Every single person who lives will die. Why? Because of justice.

That was the beginning of death. That's why death came into this world in the first place. So right from the beginning, the fact that we're not killed is already a matter of grace.

It's already a matter of God working out this plan of redemption with and bringing about the Messiah and giving grace to so many people. That started with justice. That started with death.

So that's not an unusual thing and it's not a wrong thing for God to do. So I think if you can help her to understand the role of God in bringing about justice, and if God's not going to bring about justice, who is? Yeah, right. We're not going to get it from human government.

That's right. We're just indicated with this judge. So it's a good thing.

It's a good thing that we should want. And I just want to point out one more thing that you might want to point out to her. I suspect she's probably thinking of the Canaanites as you mentioned, Greg, and you mentioned some of the things they had done.

And the Bible is very clear that God was removing them not because the Israelites were better, but because the sin of the Canaanites had reached a point. He had God had been patient for hundreds of years. And it reached a point where he needed to remove them from the land for various reasons, justice being among them, but also protecting the Israelites so that he could develop a culture that wouldn't be infected by these evil.

He's cleansing the land, not just of the evil wicked people that are being judged, but of their religion that would pollute the spirituality of the Jews. And when we say that, I can hear people thinking, "Oh, he's so bigoted." No, Greg, just describe what that involved. If

you have people following a false God, you have a lot of evil that follows from that in suffering and pain.

It wasn't that God just said, "Well, I don't want to compete." Yeah, right. He had a reason. He wanted to make this people into people who would reflect him well to the world and would bring about the Messiah and would understand who the Messiah was and what he was there for, and it would make sense to them.

All these things were happening. But even in the case of removing the Canaanites, not only was God showing justice at that moment, but he was also showing grace towards Israelites because again, he says over and over, "I'm not doing this because you're better than them. I'm not doing this because you're so righteous.

This is out of my grace because I promised that I would work out this plan through Abraham's children all the way up to Jesus. And this is all a matter of grace. So even in this justice, he's also showing grace and love at the same time.

So it's all interconnected. And this is true with every story of justice. Think about Noah, justice and grace there.

Think about the cross, justice and grace there. All these things that God's doing, even in the midst of justice, he's still showing grace. And that's what's amazing because he doesn't need to do that.

And I think about, there's one passage. I just recently realized this and I don't know why I hadn't noticed this before the last year or so. But in Revelation, it talks about a book is brought out and people are weeping because no one is found who is worthy to open.

Now, when they break the seals on that book, it brings about judgment. So the question is, nobody is worthy to bring about these judgments. And then they look around and they say, "Oh, the lamb is worthy." Now, what's interesting is it doesn't say he's worthy because he's sinless.

This is the amazing part. It says he's worthy because he redeemed people for himself. And so it was his grace and his suffering for others that made him worthy to bring about this judgment.

And in that, we see this really close connection between God showing justice and God showing grace at the same time in same events towards different people, of course, many times. But it's always connected. So when you look at the justice, you can also point out the act of grace that's happening at that same time.

You know, that's a really great explanation. I hadn't thought about the book of Revelation like that in that particular passage. But one other thing that I want people to keep in mind is that God's rules that get punished if they're broken are not arbitrary

rules.

So I just had my oil changed, you know, and what a pain to get your oil changed every three to five thousand months. Why do they make you do that? Why does the manufacturers say that? Well, that's because that's how your engine is going to run well. You know, so I can keep my fluids changed.

I got a vehicle that's over 300,000 miles, you know, it works. All right. Now that's a parallel to God's rules as well.

God set up a plan that was for the sake of human flourishing. All right. He made the world and offered guidelines about how humans made the image of God made in a very particular and peculiar way will do best in the world that he made.

It's for human flourishing. Male and female, he created them be fruitful and multiply, and man should leave his father, his mother, and going to his wife, the two have become one flesh, whatever God has tried together to let no man separate. Okay.

All of these things are part of the creation order for the sake of flourishing. And when we see the violation of all those things, we see bad, bad things happen to human beings. Okay.

So God's rules that he's enforcing are not just whatever's, but they are consistent with the world he made. So we do well. And they are not just arbitrary.

Therefore, therefore, therefore, our good. Therefore, our flourishing. And, you know, even the first commandment with a promise children obey your parents so that it will go well with you.

And you'll live long in the land or whatever. So I just wanted to add that detail. In fact, what is said about the law is that the law defines love.

A lot of times people will say love is the fulfillment of the law. And what they're thinking in their minds is, oh, that means love Trump's law. And actually what the passages say, and there are a few different places where Paul talks about love and says, for this reason, you are not to commit adultery.

You are not to do these things. In other words, it's the law that's defining how to see love, how to understand love. It's not that love is something the law is trying to accomplish, but it can trump the law because love is so much better.

No, the love, the laws that God gave us were intended to teach us how to love and what love is. Right. In fact, let me just to close this session, this particular question off, which probably closed this session off now that this was such an important issue because there's a lot of confusion on it.

I just want to read this from Psalm 19. In the Jesus movement, we used to sing these verses. So I know a lot of these verses just because of the song was a really sweet music.

The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul. The testimony of the Lord is sure making wise, the simple, the precepts of the Lord are right rejoicing the heart. The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes and the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever.

The judgments, here we go. Judgments of the Lord are true. They are righteous altogether.

They are more desirable than gold. Yes, then much fine gold, sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them, your servant is warned and in keeping them, there is great reward.

Psalm 19. Well, thank you, Greg. And thank you, Rachel, for the great question.

I know a lot of people have this question because I received this question. I'm sure you've heard this question many times. So thank you for that.

If you have a question, send it to us on Twitter with the hashtag #STRAsk. Or you can go through our website, just go to our podcast page, look for #STRAsk. And you'll find a link right at the top of the page that will tell you how you can leave a question for us.

Just keep it short. All right, thank you. Thank you for listening.

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

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