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How Can I Get into Spiritual Conversations with People?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about how to get into spiritual conversations with people and what to say to someone who says Jesus, the stories in the Bible, Heaven, etc. are all just metaphorical.

* Greg's tactics seem to be designed to react to something someone says, but how do you get into a conversation with someone to begin with?

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Transcript

[MUSIC] [DING] You're listening to the #STRSc podcast with Amy Hall and Greg Cokol. I almost got my name wrong there. >> [LAUGH] >> Wasn't sure if I was going to say your name first or mine.

>> I would be famous. >> I was famous. >> All right.

Greg, let's start with a tactical question. >> This one comes from Nate. I've been reading tactics and I'm really enjoying it.

I was just wondering though, it seems like it's designed to react to something someone says, whether in conversation already or something you overheard or observed about them, but how do you get in conversation with someone to begin with? >> Yeah, I have that question a lot and he's right. The tactical game plan largely is most effective when others are making claims against you as a Christian. Or making some claims about some spiritual thing.

So I have this waitress and she says, "The universe takes care of me." Well, what does that mean? So I got to ask, what do you mean by that basically? There's a whole conversation we had. It's in the new book by the way. It's an interesting conversation we had, but it was initiated because somebody else made the comment.

I get asked, well, how do you get into conversations of a spiritual nature? If the other person isn't asking, I think that's the sense of the question. That's quite a bit more difficult. Now, some people are much more aggressive than I am.

It isn't like I have all these clever ways of introducing spiritual things. I have one suggestion that I'll make and I actually got a for Jay Warner Wallace and I think he got it from somebody else. But he used it at a reality once in one of his talks and I thought, "Hey, that's a good one.

That's a keeper." So I'll tell that in a moment. But I realize that there are times when I'm talking to other people about just whatever. And I'm thinking, "Well, how can I turn a corner with this a little bit?" And I end up saying something that is not at all clever.

I'm just trying to say something. Well, people are complaining about politics or something. I said, "That's why it's good that this isn't the only world that we have access to, that this life isn't the only life there is." Well, that's not very profound.

And they might say, "What are you talking about?" or, "I'll just throw out something." And all it is is a little bit of chum if you're using a fishing example, where you're throwing out stuff in the water and see if any fish come around and start nibbling at it. And that's all I'm doing. I'm just thinking, "Well, if I just kind of breach some aspect of the topic, at least there's something for the Holy Spirit to work with." And it just may be that a person has been thinking about these things, and that I mentioned it, they might say, "I've really been thinking about this.

This happened once on an airplane in a gentleman sat next to me, and I didn't want to get into spiritual conversation." And I didn't think I could relate to. He was a young guy and whatever. He's a different cultural slice than me.

But within a few minutes, maybe five minutes of just making a small talk, and that's part of this, just making a small talk, showing an interest in people, we ended up talking about spiritual things. And I'm not exactly sure how we got into it, but I must have said something. And what his response to me was, it really shocked me, says, "You know, I've been thinking a lot about those things lately." No, there was, "I've been thinking about spiritual things." And so the fact that I just broached something spiritual gave him something to respond to, and the Holy Spirit to then begin to use in moving the conversation.

Once it's moving, for me, it's a lot easier. But I think getting into these conversations, initiating them, is a little bit harder. Sometimes I'll ask questions about, just like the witch in Wisconsin, about the jewelry she was wearing, you know, and it was a pentagram, and the cultic symbol, turns out she was a witch.

Sometimes it's a book somebody's reading that seems to have spiritual implications, and

I'm thinking about the airplane right now, and asking, "Hey, is that book good?" Yeah, it was a new-agey book. And I said, "They talk about Jesus?" And that book, "Oh, yeah, they talk about a lot." I said, "Have you ever read Jesus for yourself?" In other words, have you read the primary source documentation about Jesus, and not some new-agers twist on it? Well, it turned out that that little conversation went absolutely nowhere felt right on its face. So the guy wasn't even interested in talking.

What do you mean, "I read Jesus?" I said, "You know, like in the gospels." No, I don't read that stuff. You know, and then it was clear he wanted to get back to his reading, and he didn't want to talk to me. Okay, well, I just took a shot.

So the point of making you- sometimes you just do something, you throw something out, and see if it sticks. And you don't try not to sound too weird, and not- this sounds certainly not abrupt, or unpleasant, or unkind, or anything like that, but something to kind of, especially if it doesn't have to do with some kind of ethical issue, like, you know, almost- What do you think about abortion? Yeah, or something like that. All of- yeah, abortions are going to hell.

You know, and then this just- but if you talk about the human condition, refer to that. So the first point is, yeah, that's not always easy, and sometimes for me, it's just silly. It's just hokey, I think, but that sometimes it works.

It gives God something to work with. So I'll just take a step and try to introduce some concept, but I have nothing that's really clever, some standard way of doing this, all right? But I was going to suggest what Jay Warner shared once at a reality in one of his talks, and here's the question you can ask, but I'll just roleplay it as if I were asking someone so someone could see how this would lead into it. If you're having a conversation with somebody, maybe some of you know, or some of you just met, but you're conversing.

Here's what you could say. Do you mind if I ask you a question? I mean, it's kind of a personal question if you don't want to answer. That's a right too, but I just been thinking about something I'm curious about your opinion.

What do you think? No, go ahead. Ask it. Okay, great.

Here's the question that I've been thinking about, all right? What do you think happens when you die? What do you think happens when you die? There you go. Okay, that's spiritual category. You're just getting somebody's opinion to let them talk.

You don't want to make it sound like I'm just asking this so I can pound you with my Bible. Okay, you want to hear what they have to say. So that is a kind of a what do you mean by that even though they haven't said anything yet.

So you're getting information, you're gathering information about maybe their spiritual

view about something that's really significant that has crossed everybody's mind at some point. What happens when you die? What do you think happens? Now, if they say, I don't know and I don't know how anybody can know, I'm going to ask, why would you think nobody could know that? There is a response to their comment, but it's a question and I want them to talk. And then partly in my own mind, I'm thinking, well, I might try to lead to if there was somebody who came back from the dead, maybe what that person had to say might be significant.

So this relates to NDE's near death experiences. And it also introduces the concept of the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus didn't have a near death experience.

He was dead three days in the grave. He was packed with 75 pounds of spices. He was already being mummified and he walks out of the grave.

Now that might be a point of contention for them, but this is something to introduce. Well, if it turned out that someone like Jesus actually rose from the dead and he was dead as a doornail kind of dead, would that have any implications for the answer to that question? Notice, I'm now introducing Jesus, but I'm doing it with a question, tossing the ball in their court. Now, if they say, well, I think I'm going to heaven or I think that I'm going to be reincarnated or whatever opinion they give about what they think is going to happen, now it's appropriate to say, I'm curious, why do you think that's what's going to happen? All you're doing is gathering information.

You're just being a student of somebody else's view at this point and just staying a student and asking these questions can have a significant impact on somebody because I've seen it happen. Even if you're not taking the initiative to kind of preach in some way your own view, that's a third step of the club, using questions to make a point. But if you're using it, like with this question, you can make a lot of progress, it seems to me, without being particularly clever, just employing your first two Colombo maneuvers and the first two Colombo questions.

Now, when I say make a lot of progress, I mean you can move a conversation forward and discuss spiritual things. I don't know if that person is going to be responsive in a positive way to what you have to say or will reject it ultimately. That's up to the Holy Spirit.

I'm trying to do what I can to move the conversation productively forward. That's motion that God can work with. That's the way I picture it.

But if there's no motion, if I'm not doing anything, then there's very little for God to work with for the Holy Spirit to enter into, so to speak. But if I can get this going and I have a conversation, then it's a little different situation. I really like your idea about the question about, or your comment about, "That's why I'm glad this isn't the only life or the third step." The reason why I think that's a really good one is because people are often talking

about things that have gone wrong.

Lately, no matter what a person's political views, their conversation will eventually turn to something that they think is going wrong. Along those lines, it just occurred to me that maybe a comment about justice would also work and say, "Well, that's why I'm really, I'm glad that there's going to be an ultimate justice. What do you think about that?" One day, justice is going to be done.

It certainly isn't done here. One day, it will be. Of course, Lewis has talked about this.

I think that's a great... Justice comes up a lot, and that's something that we can start a conversation about because how do you ground justice? How do you think it's going to happen? Will it happen? Do you hope it will happen? That's something that people are desiring that we can offer with Christianity. Well, something else that Lewis pointed out, and I'm reading back through *Weight of Glory*, which is a collection of essays. I'm not sure which particular essay might have a weight of glory.

It might be transposition. There's a number of them in there. It's a very interesting point.

I never even thought about it before that what we are teaching people is that, look at this, as you mentioned, this life is not the only life. This life is a preparation for the true utopia heaven, and we're moving towards that. Secularists think this is the life where that's going to happen.

But what the point he made that was interesting is even secularists say that it's not now, but it's in the future. Look at what we can build. Every politician, we're going to even make America great again.

Somewhere in the future, we work now so that we can have something better in the future. Nothing wrong with those kinds of things, but even in a secular sense, utopia is always out there somewhere that we're moving toward, but we never, ever get there, not in this life. Such a great observation, because I hadn't thought of it that way, but our worldview is completely consistent with that.

We can work to make our lives better knowing that ultimately this life is not, nothing in this life is ever going to satisfy. It just started reading *Ecclesiastes*. I read three chapters very slowly and more thoughtfully, much more, I think, than I have in the past.

It was very interesting those first week chapters, you know, vanity and vanities. This life, no matter what, is not going to ultimately satisfy. And we go to the dust.

Well, we know, we realize that going to the dust is the end of this life, but it's not the end of life. And so these are all, these are all details that could factor in to a conversation with other people. The idea of hope, the idea of fulfillment, things people are looking for, you could ask them, how do you keep going when you're discouraged? What is your

goal? What are you heading towards? I don't know, there's all sorts of things, but right now people are talking about bigger issues, bigger ideas, justice and hope and goodness and badness and all these things help us in our conversations and they will come up.

Well, I'll be the first to admit and I have already, I'm not, that is not my strong point. Okay, once we're into things, I can kind of work things out, think of questions, but this one is a strong point for me. Other people have their own ways of doing it and there's my suggestion that I got from Jim who got it from somebody else.

I think that's one option, but think about things yourself, how you might bring these things up and question people. I think what's really valuable here is forget about preaching. Think about engaging in conversation on critical issues and how do people solve these things.

Do you want to know why I think it's going to happen? So you have this conversation. Are you interested in hearing my opinion of how this works out? This isn't the only life we love. Okay, this is preparation for another life.

Okay, and that would be a move into the Christian worldview. The problem is though, we're going to have to give an account and that's not a pretty picture. Well, that's the second part of the justice thing.

Yeah, justice is great until you realize it's also going to apply to you. That's right. That's right.

And these are concepts I develop in the story, reality towards the end of the book. So a friend of mine who works in the film industry also has a question that he often asks. And I think it's a good one.

He has some form of the question, "Hey, what did you do last weekend?" And then he will move into the idea of, "Did you go to church? Did you used to go to church when you were young?" Or you could move to say, "I went to church." "Oh yeah, did you go to church?" Or, "Did you used to go to church? What's your church present there?" "Why don't you anymore?" Or something like that. Well, I find that's a really good one. And I find sometimes when I get in these conversations, I'm talking with disaffected Christians.

"Oh yeah, I used to go in double. There's a waitress. Where was I? I can't even remember." But it was an afternoon event.

We went out to get a bite to eat of TGI Fridays or something like that. They're open till 11. So one of the few places after 10 o'clock.

And, "Oh, I used to go in this waitress's." And I just, I don't know, just really boldly, we were talking to be real friendly and everything. And I said like, "I'm just a Christian. I'll just give her a name." "Christon, Jesus still wants you.

Jesus still wants you. You need him." I just said something like that. But I looked right in the face.

It was very confidently. So I knew that she had a Christian upbringing her family. Now she's a young adult and she's attracted by a whole bunch of other things and doesn't have time for that.

And maybe I would have said it, "You need him too." I don't know, just something very simple, but it was a straightforward, confident statement to a person that had a Christian background and understood what I was talking about. And I just let it sit there. You know, Greg, when you said, "Gosh, this brings so many ideas to mine," because when you said that she's distracted by other things, I think about how young people still think the world's going to make them happy.

And like you were saying in Ecclesiastes, it takes a while for them to figure that out. So maybe when they're younger, you got to plant that idea. They have to find out for themselves that these things are not going to make them happy.

Maybe it's better when you get to someone who's more middle-aged and they start to realize that things are, the world is not going to make them happy. They're not going to find fulfillment here. They're not going to have ultimate fulfillment.

It's kind of a shock when people realize that. So the older the person, the more kind of, I think, in you'll have... Vulnerable. Yes.

They will be to life's... the contingencies of life. And young people who think they'll ever die. You know, I remember when I was in college at Michigan State University in the early '70s and I like the Sarmon and Garfunkel, that's no secret.

But there was a line in one of their songs it's called Bookends. It's about growing old. And they were at the time.

They both were in their 20s. And there the line was, "How Terribly Strange to Be Seventy." It was beautifully written and done this music, "Old Friends" is the name of the piece. Two guys sitting on a bench, old guys kind of silently sharing... Quietly sharing the same years.

They got the same history, silently sharing the same fear, which is fear of death. Well, I'm 72. And Simon and Garfunkel, they're ancient.

They're still alive. But you see pictures, you can't even recognize them, you know, just like a lot of old people compared to when they were in their 20s. But young people don't think about that.

That 70? Are you kidding me? I can't even count that high kind of thing. Until someone of

their friends is taken like that, an accident, a disease, and all of a sudden their mortality descends upon them, the sense of their mortality. So sometimes those are times to take advantage of things.

We don't know when we're going to go. Let's do one more, Greg. This one comes from Seth.

What would you say to someone who says, "Jesus, the stories in the Bible, its ideas, heaven, hell are metaphorical. When pressed why a missionary would risk their life for a metaphor, he gives me examples of people who died for ideas every day." Yeah, well, that's true. That last point.

But the question I would ask is, what makes you think that these are all metaphors first? And they're not descriptions of reality. And even if they're metaphors, and this is a really important one here, even if they're metaphors, what are they metaphors of? I just wrote that down to me. Oh, so... You've taught me well, Greg.

Because even metaphors are meant to communicate some literal truth. Some... They're communicating something true. If I say to my wife, "Honey, you are a fragrant aroma.

You are a breath of fresh air. You are a sunshine in my life. Okay, these are all figures of speech.

But what am I communicating? I'm communicating something about the pleasure and the satisfaction and the sweetness that she brings into my life. Okay, those are the real things I'm describing with the metaphor. So if heaven and hell are metaphors, first, I would want to know why someone thinks that given the writings that these terms are found in.

Okay? So when the text says, "Where there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth." Okay? I don't take that literally. I don't know that people are going to be... Maybe they will be. But let's just say that's a metaphor.

It's a metaphor of absolute and extreme agony. Okay? So the wailing and gnashing of teeth may be a figure of speech, but the point it's trying to convey is the agony of hell. Now, why would you take hell as a metaphor when we have these kinds of terms that are meant to describe it and we are being warned about it? Don't fear him who can... Don't fear him who can kill the body and not the soul, Matthew 10.

Fear him who can throw both body and soul into hell. All right, so hell's not real. Oh, it's not? No, it's just a metaphor.

Okay, what are we supposed to be afraid of? Jesus is saying we should be fearing not people who can kill us, but someone else who can do worse. Okay, what's the metaphor? Signifying. I never get this appeal.

Oh, that's just metaphoric. That's just metaphoric of what? And why would you think that's just a mere metaphor and not signifying, well, in the case of hell, hell is a real place. A real state of existence, if you will, if you don't want to say a place like it's a location, you know, like Houston, Texas, that's hell, man, in the summer.

Just talk about the weather. Anyway, yeah, we don't mean it that way. This is talking about a state of existence.

Okay, why would that not be like really unpleasant? You don't want to be in that state of existence given the record. So the here is the key and this particular challenge, Amy, at least the first part of it, that's just a metaphor. It's their job to demonstrate it's a metaphor.

It's not our job to prove it's not, because they're making the claim second step of the Colombo game plan. The person who makes the claim bears the burden of proof. That's why I want to go and say why why do you think it's a metaphor? Let's go to the text.

Okay, why would you think this is not speaking about some real feature of the world? Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Okay. All right, it's a metaphor.

What's the metaphor of? That's your second step. And by the way, that's just another clarification question that's still Colombo number one. Okay, tell me more, tell me more, tell me more.

It's not even a rationale. So it's, it's, it's, it's, you know, it's, the burden is on them. Don't get them a free ride.

I guess is what I'm saying. Yeah, I think those two questions are really crucial here. What do you mean by that? How did you come to that conclusion? Because until you know that, I don't even know where I would take this exactly.

It depends on what they say. And it depends. I like your question asking, have you ever read? Have you ever read the documents? Because I think once you do that, you can see it's not written like a fairy tale.

Right. And especially back then, they didn't write detailed fictional novels back then. It just wasn't a thing.

The way, was it Lewis who said that that really impressed him? It might have been him where he, because he was used to reading all of these ancient, yes. Right. That was his field.

So when he read the New Testament, all of a sudden, he was saying this, this is not the same thing. It's not the same kind of literature. It's exactly.

He said, I know mythology. This isn't the. So was it Lewis? I've heard.

Okay. Yeah. He made that point.

And now the point was as to the, was regarding the genre. Okay. Now, whether it's true or not, accurate, that's another question.

But he's saying, you can't just dismiss this as mythology, because it that's not the kind of thing. It's ancient biography. Now, maybe it's not accurate.

That's another question, but it's not mythology. Okay. It's not a metaphor.

It's exactly. And by the way, when you read it, now who is our friend, Guillaume Binon, who wrote the book. Confessions of a French atheist.

Yes, that's right. And we've had him on the Arab before. But this was a feature of his own testimony, because he decided he was trying to disprove Christianity so that he could get the girl, basically, who was a Christian.

And so he began to read the New Testament and the gospels. And first thing that appeared to him is this is history. I'm reading history.

I know what that looks like. All right. And second thing that occurred to him is that Jesus was really smart.

It's a pretty clever guy. You know, so, yeah, if you read the text, it's going to be very hard for you to dismiss it as such. But this other point of even metaphor has meant to commit a literal truth.

Metaphors have to be understood in their literal meaning before they can be leveraged into a figure of speech. So I'll make an application controversial now, but I just want people to think about that. So in Genesis chapter one, it says, and the first day and the second day and the third day and the fourth day, okay, or morning and evening morning and evening morning and evening, okay? Well, people want to say, well, that's a literal solar day.

How can it be anything? A day is a day there. That's the word right there. Well, that doesn't solve saying what the word day means literally, Yom doesn't solve the question, answer the question of whether this word is being pressed into service for a, as a figure of speech, because first you must understand the literal sense of the word before it's useful.

So I mentioned a few moments ago about my wife being a ray of sunshine. Well, I can only, if you don't understand what a ray of sunshine actually is, in its literal sense, you cannot see the figurative way it's being used in this sentence. So just looking at the word and saying literal doesn't answer the interpretive problem, you have to see how the word is being used in the flow of thought and in the context of a passage.

Now, people could still dispute my take on that. That's not the point. I do think this point, though, that I just made is often overlooked in discussions on things like Genesis chapter one, is that is what is the nature of the language or what is the structure of the piece that first chapter and is are we being instructed to take it as a historical account in a straightforward fashion or does it seem maybe of something else as being done there? And just saying the word Yom means day doesn't solve the problem.

You've got to see how that word is being used in the context and if it's being pressed into service as a figure or not. Well, thank you, Greg. And thank you, Nate and Seth.

We appreciate hearing from you. If you have a question, send it on Twitter with the hashtag #strask or you can go to our website, go to our podcast page and go to hashtag #strask and you'll see a link there. You can send us a question.

Just keep it short. That's all we ask. It should be about the size of a tweet, which is only a couple of sentences.

But our answers are not going to be short. We are not going to return the favor. Well, and you guys have been doing great at this.

Most of the questions I've been getting are just the right size. So thank you for that and we look forward to hearing from you again. This is Amy Hall and Greg Coco for Stand to Reason.

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