

Ask Jim: Jesus in hell, salvation after death, and “God made me this way”

TRANSCRIPT

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[00:00:00] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Welcome back to the Denison Forum Podcast. We're glad to have you with us. We're sitting down again today with our cofounder and cultural apologist, doctor Jim Denison. Doctor Jim, how are you?

[00:00:15] **Dr. Jim Denison:** I'm doing well, Mark. How are you today?

[00:00:17] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Doing great.

And as we often joke about, not bored. The world doesn't afford us that opportunity, doesn't seem like. But,

[00:00:24] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Not much.

[00:00:25] **Dr. Mark Turman:** We wanted to come back and have another opportunity. We do this periodically, maybe three, four times a year where we ask our audience to send in questions and then to pitch them to you and just create kind of a free flowing conversation around some of these questions. As a matter of full transparency. Wanna let everybody know I've seen the questions ahead of time, but, Jim, you have not seen the questions

[00:00:50] **Dr. Jim Denison:** none.

[00:00:51] **Dr. Mark Turman:** ahead of time. And so, we're gonna put you on the spot a little bit and see how you might squirm. We'll see if we could actually accomplish that or not. But we know that you're prepared. You've lived in these kinds of environments before both as a pastor and as a professor uh, as well as as an apologist, sometimes on college campuses and in other kinds of meetings.

And I think you'll discern that our audience has been kind of thinking in a trajectory. Several of these questions seem to have a common theme to me. Let's dive right in. And hopefully, those that have offered the questions will recognize their questions even though their names are not attached. So, here we go.

Question number one. After a Christian dies, they open their eyes in heaven. To the repentant thief on the cross next to Jesus. Jesus said, today, you will be with me in paradise. So here's the question.

How is it theologically correct according to the Apostle's Creed that Jesus descended into hell after his crucifixion and prior to his resurrection. What is that passage in, I think it is, Peter? What is Peter referring to when he says that Jesus descended into

[00:02:07] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Well, let's start with a hard question, shall we? Let's do something that, you know, you know, how about those Rangers think they'll repeat? I mean, they are looking for more pitching these days. You know? Uh, what Yeah. Let's go Cowboys. You go, Luka Doncic, I hope he still likes the Mavericks in a year. You know? Let's let's start with something challenging here, shall we? So,

Really, that is one of the perplexing question, you know, Mark, one of the perplexing questions in the theological world because Peter's actual statement doesn't say he descended to hell. Doesn't actually use those words at all. Talks about him preaching to the spirits in prison. I actually have an article about this that I wrote some time ago that I would think a person could find on a website if they googled around to ask about that, but it essentially boils down into a number of different options that are here.

When it says he preached to the spirits in Prison. In the context in which Peter's making that statement, it could be thought that this occurred after his death. And so that between Jesus' death and his resurrection, he preached to the spirits in prison, and the spirits in prison, it could be thought, are in hell. So, therefore, he descended to hell. And so, therefore, one of the versions of the Apostles' Creed has that as part of its statement. And that gets to the question that's there, and that sometimes gets repeated in churches these days.

A second version of this would be to say that Peter's not talking about something that Jesus did after his death. Doesn't have to be read that way. That really his ministry included preaching to spirits in prison, and spirits in prison could just be a metaphorical way of saying Jesus was preaching to the lost or Jesus was preaching to those who were imprisoned by Satan in sin, that sort of thing. And that this doesn't have to mean that it's something Jesus did after his death and prior to his resurrection at all. You take out kind of the locative piece of that, the chronological piece of all of that is a way to understand Peter's statement.

And then a third way to do this is to say the spirits in prison has to do with angelic beings. When we're speaking of spirits here, we're speaking of not humans. And so now we're in this kind of mysterious sort of way in which Jesus, back to Ephesians six, is part of a spiritual warfare against the principalities and powers, you know, and that what we're talking about doesn't have to do with hell so much as it has to do with imprisoned spirits, demons, as it were. And again, you could think about that between Jesus' death and resurrection. You could think about that as part of his earthly ministry. So a lot of different ways people interpret all of this.

But the reason I think the question is so well taken is I myself don't think It's possible to square the Apostle's Creed with Jesus' statement to the thief on the cross, today, you'll be with me in paradise. Jesus would have to take the thief to paradise and then go down to hell to preach to the spirits in prison, if that's how you wanna connect those two things up in some sort of way.

And you have other verses in Scripture that you struggle with there.

Paul says, for me to live is Christ and to die is gain. When Jesus says to the thief today, he'll be with me in just a moment, you'll be with me in paradise. Scripture seems to indicate very clearly you look at the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, you look at other statements, what seems pretty clear that at the moment of our death, we are in the afterlife, I think we're in the presence of God in the moment of our death. Now that gets to the intermediate state, which is another question you may be asking here shortly, but I think in the moment of our death, we're in the presence of God. I think Jesus was too.

When Jesus says, Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit. Hard to reconcile that with going to hell. You'd be asking yourself, okay, why would he have been sent to hell? If he's preaching to the spirits in prison that were in hell at that moment, that's not fair to those that came to hell afterwards. That's only fair to those that did right up to that moment, and that doesn't seem right and fair.

So lots of problems with that. That's why a lot of churches that use the Apostles' Creed don't use that language anymore. They'll say, he descended to the dead, as opposed to he descended to hell, Or they'll leave that out entirely. I use the Apostle's Creed every morning in my own personal Bible study, my own personal devotional life, and I don't include that phrase because I don't think he descended to the dead or descended to hell after his death. I think that's something the Apostles' Creed got wrong because I think they misinterpreted what Peter was saying. So that would be my take on a very complex subject.

[00:06:11] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Right. And at least kinda points us to the idea that, there's more going on in the activity of God than we can fully comprehend or appreciate. And I guess maybe to wrap up that question, Jim, is what, um, significance might it have for us as believers. If we

took any one of those particular interpretations, what difference does it make as it pertains to us in our own walk of faith? Is there something there that we should think about.

[00:06:42] **Dr. Jim Denison:** I think it could go on two levels depending on what you mean by spirits and what you mean by being in prison. Does speak to the compassion of the Lord, doesn't it?

That here's Jesus continuing his incarnational work and going to those that are in prison who can't get to him because they're imprisoned, whatever we choose to believe that that means. There's this incarnational compassion that applies to us. I couldn't get to God, so God came to me. Religion climbs up to God. In Christianity, God climbs down to us.

God tore the veil at Jesus' death, and the temple separating us from the Holy of Holies tore it from top to bottom, not from bottom to top. That's what makes Christianity unique. CS Lewis came late to a theological gathering, and there was a big argument going on, and he asked what they were arguing about. And he said, well, the question he was told the question is what's unique about Christianity? To which Lewis reportedly said, well, that's easy. It's grace. There's grace. That's God coming to us, and you could see that in this.

The other thing I think you could see in this is the supremacy of God relative to spirits in prison, whatever those might be. That God is bigger than that. God's able to do that. Jesus is more powerful than whatever we think about that, if that's Satan and his minions, if that's spirits imprisoned in that sense, whatever we think about that, I think God is God wins. God is King of kings and Lord of lords, and yet he condescends, as we're gonna say here before long at Christmas, to become a baby born in a manger to peasant parents worship by field hands so that all of us could know him as our lord and savior. That's the beauty of Christmas, and that's the uniqueness of Christianity.

[00:08:10] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. Yeah. Well said. Well said. I think both those points are very, very salient. The next question is somewhat related in my mind but distinct as well. Somebody asked the question, can salvation happen after death? That is, can someone die, go to hell, and then while in hell, confess Jesus and then actually be taken to heaven. Is that possible?

[00:08:34] **Dr. Jim Denison:** It's a good question. It's called postmortem evangelism, and it works kind of on two levels. The one level would be along the lines of the question, okay. Maybe I didn't believe there was a God. Maybe I didn't believe I needed Jesus. Now I'm in hell, so clearly I know there is a God.

Now I clearly know I need Jesus, and so now you would think people in hell would be the most repentant. You would think they would be the people who would be most wanting to trust in

Christ and to accept the claims of the gospel of anybody, right? And because god still loves them, because god loves them as much as he loves us, Augustine said God loves each of us as if there were only one of us. So you would think that once they're in hell, the Lord would extend to them the same grace he extends to us today.

And so somebody that isn't held trusts in Christ and therefore could go to heaven. All of that would make sense on a logical level. It's got some problems.

Rich man and Lazarus is the first thing that comes to mind. There's this gulf, Jesus said, between them and us, and us and them. So they can't come here and we can't come there. Don't wanna read too much into the details of parables, but that would be pretty misleading if Jesus' parable would indicate that what we're describing right now could happen because the parable indicates that it can't, then in fact, the opposite of that would be the case. So you'd have that, I would think, that would be a problem here. But the larger problem goes to what hell actually is.

I really appreciate CS Lewis again. I if he ever, when I see him in heaven, charges me for all the times I quoted him, I'm gonna be in trouble. But he makes the point that really, at the end of the day there are those that say to God, your will be done, and to others, god says, Your will be done. Says no one goes to hell that doesn't choose it, that God gives you freedom of choice. And if you reject him, God allows you the consequence of your choice. So people in hell choose hell.

Now you and I would say, well, now wait a minute. Once I've been there for even a split second, Why would I still wanna be there? Well, that goes to what hell actually is. The descriptions of, you know, the fire, the all of the horrific descriptions of hell. Most people across history, including Billy Graham Calvin, Luther Augustine, I would I'm not them.

I don't say that, but I would agree with them, would say that the descriptions of hell are meant to be understood metaphorically rather than literally. How would fire bother a spirit being? How could you chain a spirit being? So I'm not sure that people are in literal fire in hell so much as hell is the absence of the presence of God.

And so I think people that choose hell choose it. And I don't know that in hell they're gonna choose heaven any more than they chose heaven when they were on this planet. So nothing in Scripture indicates that people that go to hell can therefore repent and go to heaven. In fact, you'd see the opposite of that. But if you understand hell to be a choice to reject the presence of God, God allows people that choice. And I don't know why they would change their mind once they get there versus the other.

But there's another stream you could think about in postmortem evangelism here, which is that those who have not had the chance to hear the gospel in this life have an opportunity to hear it at death, before they go to hell as it were.

That's the only way God can be fair to the people that have never heard the gospel. That has problems as well. I would rather not hear the gospel in this life if I get to hear it from Jesus after I die. I think I'm more likely to believe it if he says it than if I say it or you say it.

That doesn't seem fair inside. And it also makes you wonder why do evangelism and missions now? I mean, I know that the gospel does a better thing in you. You live a better life now, but is that really why they risked and gave their lives on such levels just so you could live a better life now, where knowing if they didn't, Jesus was gonna do what they didn't do. That doesn't seem right.

So lots of stuff inside all of that as well. Post mortem evangelism. Gabriel Fockery and others have suggested that possibility as a way of dealing with the dilemma of those that never hear the gospel. But that's a little different from the question.

Bottom line, nothing in Scripture that would indicate those in hell get a second chance. The parable of the rich man of Lazarus would indicate the opposite. And if you understand hell the way I think you should, I don't think people in hell would choose to have a different chance. They chose to be there, and I think they continue to make that choice tragically. It's the old Milton's statement, I would rather, said of Satan, I would rather reign in hell than serve in heaven. I think there's a sense in which that's just the nature of the will to power.

If I reject the gospel, don't want Jesus in my life, why would I want Jesus then? I guess, would be a way to see the permanency of hell. Revelation twenty fifteen. If your name is not written in the book of life, you're cast into the lake of fire. There's nothing in there that indicates that anything happens on the other side of that that changes your status.

[00:13:05] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Jim, lots of people in our modern day say that really there is no such thing as hell. Why is why is the idea and the belief in hell necessary? Why is that so important to a proper understanding of reality and to the opportunity of

[00:13:24] **Dr. Jim Denison:** a great question. You're thinking of Rob Bell and a lot of other folks that would say love wins. You know, God wins. If if God wants you to be with him in heaven, God gets what God wants.

And so at the end of the day, what CS Lewis called the most abhorrent doctrine of the Christian faith is something we can now just kinda look past here and just kind of agree with. First of all, I would love for that to be true. We should all love for that to be true. Somebody said, beware of the preacher who preached on hell as though he liked it. You know?

Somebody else said, never preach on hell without a tear in your eye. None of us should want anyone, obviously, to be in hell. Satan, demons, much less human beings. Well, first of all, we should want there to be no hell. Second, we should do everything we can to keep people from being in level.

But more to your question, the first answer that comes to me is because that's what Scripture so clearly teaches. It's been estimated that Jesus said more about hell than he did heaven. If there is no hell, Jesus was wrong.

[00:14:24] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Right.

[00:14:25] **Dr. Jim Denison:** didn't just speak of hell metaphorically. He didn't just speak of it as a way of trying to entice you to trust in him now. Jesus made very, very clear the existence, the reality of hell in his own teaching. The rest of Scripture makes that clear as well. I wrote a book some years ago called Wrestling with God, in which I spent a lot of time wrestling with the status of The unevangelized, those that have not had a fair opportunity to hear the gospel, and the context of hell in that space. How is it fair for God to send people to hell but Object a message I've never heard. And one answer to all of that would be to say, well, he doesn't, and come to some kind of universalism here.

You can do a Christian universalism and still do John fourteen six. Jesus says, I'm the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me. It's just that everybody goes to the Father by Christ, whether they know it or not. You don't have to know Jonas Salk to benefit from the polio vaccine he created.

So Jesus' death on the cross pays for everybody's sin. Whether they know it or not, that's kind of a Christian universalism as opposed to a general universalism, which is everybody goes to heaven anyway. In which case you wonder why did Jesus die? Well, Jesus died to pay for your sin. He paid for your sin. Your sin's paid for. Your debt is canceled. When you die, you go to heaven. Christian universalism. I would love that to be true.

We should all love it to be true. Except, as I said, Jesus taught that's not true. John three eighteen to me settles the question. We all love John three sixteen. God so loved the world, he gave his only begotten son whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. In verse eighteen, Jesus says, he who believes in me is not condemned. He who does not believe in me is

condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of the Father. Those are Jesus' words in John three eighteen. So first of all, the Bible teaches that.

Second, and here we are again quoting CS Lewis, fairness demands In The Problem of Pain, he goes to great lengths to talk about the issue of health. And he asks the question, do you really want the world to live in such a way that? And he does it much better than I can recollect it right now, but he describes a horrible person, a person who has cheated his way through life, a person who's done all sorts of horrible, atrocious things and thinks he's getting away with all of it, who who thinks he's getting the better of God and the rest of us, who thinks that the joke's on you, not on him. And he's gained the system, and he goes through his entire life living like that, do you want there to be no justice for that? Do you want there to be no justice for a Hitler?

Do you want there to be a no justice for the terrorists? Do you want there to be no justice for those that abuse children? Do you really want that to be true? Where there is no justice in the next life, if not in this life, if God is holy. If God is holy, holy, holy. So you would think justice requires that.

Now one way to get around that is to do a purgatory, where one has to go through a whole lot, and they have to go through a whole lot more purgatory than somebody else does until everybody eventually winds up in heaven. That's how you could keep justice intact and still have a universalism, I suppose. But I wanna ask where the Bible says that. Again, where does Scripture teach Again, Revelation twenty fifteen.

If your name is not in the book of life, you're cast into the lake of fire. Doesn't seem to be any purgatorial sort of, intermediate context there. So so that'd be a second answer, would be justice requires help.

And then at the end of the day, the last would be back to what we said before, free will requires help. There's not a choice if there's not a consequence. If I'm on a no carb diet and I order pizza and the guy brings me celery sticks, well, I didn't really order pizza. You know? My freedom was only apparent but not real. If I, back to what we said before, really do not want a relationship with God, if I reject the gospel, if I reject a relationship with Jesus, and Jesus forces me into heaven anyway, then my free will was only apparent, but not real. So I think freedom demands it. I think justice requires it. And most of all, think Scripture teaches it.

[00:18:21] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Right. Yeah, well, great great summary of that and prompts a question really something that you alluded to a minute ago in your comments really goes to the next question, which is if salvation and that's kind of the theme that we're on with these several questions.

But if salvation is only in and through the person of Jesus, then what about those people who lived before the coming of Jesus? Are they just unlucky? This question actually came up over a lunch conversation I had a week or two ago of, well, what about all those people that live before Jesus. What about those people who live in other parts of the world that have never had a legitimate explanation of the gospel and what Jesus did? What about all those people?

Are they just unfortunate and they missed heaven? They missed salvation? And part of my answer when I was having this conversation went to Romans chapter four and the testimony of Abraham. But how would you answer that? What about people who never have legitimately been able to hear the story of Jesus and the opportunity of believing in him for the forgiveness of their sin. What about

[00:19:31] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Mhmm. To me, it's the largest question we have to face in the Christian faith. I think it's a version of the theodicy question. God's all knowing, all loving, and all powerful, how does evil exist? Well, hell is permanent suffering. How a God of all things, a father who created us for relationship with him, want that to be the case?

Well, one easy I don't mean that in a disparaging sense, but one simple solution would be to go to a version of Calvinism, a version of supralapsarian predestination that would say that God chooses some to be in heaven and some to be in hell. And those that he chooses to be in heaven are gonna be in heaven. Those he chooses to be in hell will be in hell. And God has the right to do that because he's God.

And those that are chosen for hell have no have no complaint because they're sinners, and they're getting what they deserved. And I can't get mad at God for allowing me the consequence of my choices. Even if somebody else didn't have to have the consequence of theirs, I'm getting what I deserved. And I read just the other day something Spurgeon was saying along those very lines. And so that would be one answer to the question, would be that God elects some to heaven, some to hell, And he does what he does, and it's his own mysterious sovereign ways, and that's all that we really can know because we're people and he's God.

I'm not that. I don't have that version of of God's election. I think God elects those who elect him. We could have that conversation. That's a whole another conversation to have. And so if I'm not gonna go there, then we really have two questions in front of us.

As regards those that live before Jesus' death and resurrection, let's say twenty nine AD or whenever we decide that is, I believe that that's a little different question from those that live post death and resurrection who now there is a thing we think of as the gospel that they have not had a fair opportunity indeed to understand and respond to.

For those prior to that, seems clear from what as you said, Romans four and other passages, how God seems to relate to people at that point in time that he judges them by the light they have, that God judges them as they respond to what they know of him. That's what you'll with Abraham, we believe God, and it was counted to him as righteousness. That's what you see even with people we would think of as pagans.

You think of, who was it? Abimilech or somebody that was more believing than Abraham in the issue with Sarah and was more moral than Abraham was as Abraham was lying about Sarah? And you see a lot of what you think of as godly pagans. You think of Cyrus used by God to allow the Jews to go back. And so lots of people prior to Jesus' death and resurrection who were responding to the light they had.

And it seems that that's how God deals with them because they are trusting him just like we trust in him. It's not works. They didn't earn their salvation, but their response to the light they have positioned them to receive the grace of God, whatever that means, however that function in their space. And so they didn't just get unlucky that they lived prior to the death and resurrection of Christ at twenty nine to thirty AD. That's how God dealt with them then.

Well, okay. So do that move that forward. Is that the answer to the question of the third of the world that has literally never heard the words Jesus Christ? When I was a missionary in Malaysia, I met lots of people that had never heard the syllables Jesus Christ. Those sound waves had never reached their ears.

They had never heard that name. And then another third of the world that if they do have access to the gospel, this is not in a fair context. Trust Christ and watch your family be tortured to death, and then you're beheaded, You know, sort of a situation as is the case in a lot of the world as well. Well, you could play that forward and say, well, God still judges them according to what they have. Do a Romans one kind of a thing.

You know, the God's revealed himself in nature and and through his creation. And so, they may not have heard the gospel just like Abraham hadn't heard the gospel, but they've responded to what they have heard, and God judges them in that way. That's a logical answer to the question. The problem is, why then share the gospel? Why do evangelism?

Why do missions? Why pay any price to share the gospel? You say, well, because you'll live a better life if you live a life as a Christian, even though you would die and go to heaven based on what light you do have. Well, that's true. But is that really how the apostles, as I said earlier, risked their lives?

Is that really why Christians did so much of what they did to pay such a price? Is that really why Paul said he could wish himself accursed for the sake

of his Jewish brethren, just so they could live better lives in the short life they have in this planet? That doesn't seem at all to be the case. So that's a problem if that's how you answer your question, on the go forward past the gospel. A second answer is God doesn't send them to hell for rejecting the gospel if they have never heard it.

And so it's kind of an age of accountability idea, you know, that if they have never heard the gospel in an accountable way, then God doesn't send them to hell because they haven't rejected the gospel. Well, if that's the case, then don't tell them. Because if you tell them now, they could reject the gospel, and now they could go to hell. So now advancing wisdom's not just irrelevant. It's dangerous to be sharing the gospel.

And yet, obviously, you have the Great Commission and Acts and all of that. So that doesn't seem to be the answer to the question. Postmortem evangelism is yet another way of getting at that. As we said before, Bible doesn't really seem to speak to that per se. It's more logical answer than it seems to be a biblical answer inside all of this.

And so at the end of the day, where I come down, Mark, in the midst of all of that, is to go back to who God is. God is love. The Bible says God is love. Seems implausible to me that he could send you to hell for rejecting a message you've never heard.

[00:24:59] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Right.

[00:25:00] **Dr. Jim Denison:** So I don't think that. I don't just come to that as the answer. Well, it's your fault. If they haven't heard, it's your fault. Well, that may be true, but that doesn't solve the fact that they're in hell and I'm in heaven. You know?

And so I don't know that I can just live in that space. So what I have to do is come to a practical rather than speculative answer, and that is: tell them. I think if the apostle Paul was on this conversation, and we said, Paul, what happens to those that haven't heard the gospel? He said, you're aware of people that haven't heard the gospel? Tell them. Go tell them. Be practical, not speculative. If you're not sure, tell them. Pray for them and tell them. Say, well, there's no way we could get the gospel to the whole world.

Well, think about that. If you're the only believer on the planet, you share the gospel with me, and I trust Christ. Now they're two of us. Tomorrow, we share the gospel with two more. They trust Christ. Now they're four. The next day we share the gospel, they trust Christ. That's eight.

The next day, they're sixteen. The next day, thirty two. The next day, sixty four. In thirty two days, the entire planet has come to Christ by multiplication.

[00:26:07] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Right.

[00:26:08] **Dr. Jim Denison:** I can't win one a day. Could you win one a year in thirty two years? That's how multiplication works. Our problem is we don't do it by multiplication. We do it by addition. We think it's the preacher who's only responsible for evangelism, and it's his job to get as many people to trust in Christ so they can come to church and watch him do his job. If we were disciple making, winning Christians who win Christians who win Christians, If we do what Jesus did, Master Plan of Evangelism, remember that book, Robert coleman? Spent three years with twelve men, So that they then could multiply the gospel if we did it like Jesus did it in a month, if you and I were the only believers on the planet, much less the fact that a third of the world claims to follow Christ, well, in that case, in two days.

I understand there are barriers to the gospel. I'm not trying to be naive. There are places in the world that do not have access to the gospel. Good news there is the internet is making it more possible to get the gospel to them than ever before in Christian history. My good friend, Walt Wilson, at Global Media Outreach, really does believe that in the next five to seven years, they're gonna give everybody on the planet seven chance to hear the gospel through the technology that's available today.

So maybe that's part of the solution here as well. At the end of the day, I don't know how to reconcile a God who loves us with the biblical reality of hell in the context of the unevangelized, because it's an unbiblical question. God never intended there to be unevangelized. That was never the intention. That was never the plan.

The plan was that we would do our jobs as the early church was doing its job by multiplication, and the world would hear the gospel. That was the intention. Jesus certainly envisioned a day when the whole world would know. In Matthew twenty four fourteen, he said, the gospel will be preached to all nations, and then shall the end come. He certainly envisioned that day. He commissioned us to that day. He called us to be as witnesses to the ends of the earth. And so God certainly intends that to be the so God couldn't intend us to do something that couldn't happen.

And so boil it down. Let's be practical more than speculative. Let's leave that with God and do our best to share the gospel with the people we do know. If somebody says, I can't trust in Christ because I don't know what happens to the unevangelized. Well, that question obviously doesn't apply to them or they couldn't ask it.

[00:28:25] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Right.

[00:28:26] **Dr. Jim Denison:** If I know enough about the gospel to ask what happens to people that don't know the gospel, clearly, I know the gospel enough to ask the question, so the question is no longer relevant to me, so let's talk about me. I don't know about person I can't reach. Let's talk about the people we can. Let's go there.

But, again, I don't want to be heard, just to summarize here, Mark, very complex issue, as suggesting that John three eighteen is anything but what it says. Jesus says, whoever does not believe in him is condemned already. He does say that.

Revelation twenty fifteen, if your name is not the Lamb's book of life, you are cast into the lake of fire. I would not wanna suggest universalism here on any level. Would not wanna suggest there's any way to heaven except through Christ. Acts four twelve, there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. what God does with that relative, those that haven't heard before they die, I'm gonna trust God with that, and I'm gonna try to do my best to reach the people I can and know that God is good.

[00:29:27] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. And

[00:29:28] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Very large conversation.

[00:29:29] **Dr. Mark Turman:** yeah. Big big conversation and something that is good for us to think about in some ways, but really comes back to that reality of fundamentally that God is real and God is good and is more real than anything else we've ever experienced and more good than anything we can possibly conceive. That's the foundation.

And then the other part of it is responsibility, starting with your own response to the revelation that you have. And if you don't know what the gospel is, that okay. Well, let us tell you what the gospel is. Let us tell you what Dean in John three seventeen and eighteen say, and let's talk about what Ephesians two eight, nine, and ten talk about, that salvation is by grace alone. And then in that goodness, you know, we can as part of God's goodness, he has an expression and a reality of fairness that is beyond any standard of fairness that we might be able to conceive.

And so we can trust that in the goodness of God and through the grace of God, he is doing all that can be done for the salvation of any and every individual, because that is his passion. That is his desire. And there's a there are levels of this we're not going to understand because we're at least, for now, not capable of understanding. and there are and then, ultimately, this is an issue of the sovereignty and goodness of God. Should engage and embrace the part that is our responsibility to respond personally to the revelation of Christ and to the responsibility of being ambassadors for Christ.

That that is a two part, thing that we should be claiming.

[00:31:15] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Mhmm.

[00:31:15] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. So yeah. Really helpful. Wanna let me pivot to a really completely different topic.

We've been talking a lot about salvation, which is very important and something we want to talk about. But recently in our culture a very well known pastor has come under a lot of criticism, uh, around dealing with the Bible and the Bible's perspective on sexual identity, sexual orientation, issues of transgenderism. And what's come out of that conversation in part is this idea of people particularly that express identities as being LGBTQ, one of those categories or multiple ones. This idea of I was born this way.

I didn't ask for this. I don't want this. I've asked God to remove this and this very, very complex, difficult question of, I didn't choose to be gay or transgender in my understanding. This is something that chose me. It's something that marked me from basically, the idea God made me this way.

[00:32:27] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Mhmm.

[00:32:27] **Dr. Mark Turman:** And that argument is not particularly new when it comes to certain things. I can remember when I started out as a pastor some thirty five, forty years ago, this conversation was applied to those struggling with alcoholism. Well, I was born this way. I didn't choose to be so attracted to alcohol. It's just a part of the way I am created.

So whether it's relative to sexual orientation and identity issues or something like alcoholism or is, Jim, how do we think about that, and what's biblically wrong or dangerous when we start coming to something like sexuality or other things, and we say, well, God made me this way. What's the what's a good biblical way to think about that and to respond to that?

[00:33:19] **Dr. Jim Denison:** It's It's a great question, Mark. It truly is. My initial thoughts are on two levels.

The first is that we have a decision to make at the very beginning of this conversation, which is, am I going to interpret my experience to the prism of Scripture or Scripture through the prism of my experience? my experience might be.

If I experience myself as having been created to be same sex attracted or to be alcohol dependent or whatever the issue might be, Well, then I'm going to decide God made me this way. God doesn't make mistakes. God's a perfect God, and therefore that experience becomes normative for how I interpret Scripture.

So to pick the same sex attraction, dimension of all of this, so therefore, the Bible can't mean what it's often said to mean relative to what God thinks about same sex attraction. And now I'm gonna reinterpret the six passages in Scripture that speak very directly to that, And I'm going to see them not the way that the church has for twenty centuries seen them. I'm gonna find other ways to see them. That when Paul is speaking of in Romans one, for instance, of those that exchanged unnatural passions that, well, my passions are natural to be attracted to a male. And so he can't be talking about that.

Maybe he's talking about people that were heterosexually attracted but acted in homosexual ways. Maybe he's talking about pederasty there. Maybe he's talking about abusive relationships as opposed to covenantal relationships, and you've heard all of that. There are ways of reinterpreting the text because it can't mean what it's historically been understood to mean because it doesn't align with my experience. My experience is X, so the Bible has to mean Y. It can't mean this, it has to mean that.

Once we start doing that, whatever the experiential prism is through which we look, we've made the mistake. We've made a fundamental mistake. Someone said the Bible said it, I believe it, and that settles it. Actually, the Bible said it, and that settles it whether I believe it or not. God's word is objectively God's word. Truth is truth. Truth is objectively true. The postmodern relative, as it says, truth is all is dependent on personal opinion is offering an objective statement. He's saying objectively there's no such thing as objective truth.

He's making a truth claim that there are no truth claims. Try doing that in science. Try doing that with your doctor. I've got a headache. Well, you could be suffering from migraines or you could have a brain tumor, but I don't really know. So which truth is your truth? You want there to be truth here. At the end of the day, there's only one road that gets to your house. At the end of the day, there's only one key that opens the lock. And so that's the first thing we have to decide here.

If I'm going to interpret experience through the prism of Scripture, well, then my statement that God made me this way becomes a very different conversation. Now so let's go there. Let's decide that we're going to say the Bible means what it's always meant, that the Bible, when it speaks of, like, same sex attraction as an example, or when it speaks of alcohol abuse as another example, that it means what has always been interpreted to mean, which is God does not intend us to be in same sex relations. God does not intend us to abuse alcohol, whatever the issue might be.

In a same sex conversation again to go to that. Let's say that that's what the Bible intends to say, and that's what God means, which is absolutely what I think is the right thing to do here. So now from the time I have known myself in the context of sexual orientation, I've been attracted to the into the same sex. Doesn't mean God made me that way. There's a nature nurture piece in it. We have not found, by we, I mean researchers have not discovered, the genetic explanation for same sex attraction.

There was an attempt years ago to do that by measuring the hypothalamuses of cadavers, But it's that study's been very, very much debunked. It was very much a flawed study. There has been no genetic predisposition to same sex attraction that has been discovered. If there were one tomorrow that were discovered, that would mean you therefore have to act on that attraction. We do know there's a genetic predisposition to alcoholism.

That doesn't mean one has to choose to become an alcoholic. Even if there were a predisposition, it's genetic. But right now, nature nurture has not been settled. To it may be that as early as I know myself, I was saying sex attracted, but there are environmental questions here. Could have to do with the family in which I grew up, family of origin, abuse experiences I might have had. Other contexts in which some of that can be part of how I came to know myself in that space. So it's a nature nurture question as opposed to God made me this way.

But then the other piece, Mark, that I would wanna say, just because I have an attraction to do something or a desire to do something doesn't mean God intends me to do it. If you move that direction, then every sinful attraction is legitimized. Every sinful desire becomes appropriate under the guise of God made me that way.

I want to do I want to steal, so God made me a thief. I want to murder, so God made me a murderer. I want to lie, so God made me a liar. Fortunately, by God's grace, we have the ability to choose against our fallen desires. Bottom line.

I think that people that suffer with, struggle with same sex attraction issues are dealing with the vestige of the fall. We all struggle with vestiges of the fall. I'm just as tempted, heterosexually, as somebody else might be tempted, homosexually. I am just as responsible for refusing heterosexual temptation as my friend is to refuse homosexual temptation. For me to come along and say, God made me heterosexual, therefore, I get to act on every heterosexual impulse I have, would be just as fallacious, just as sinful as for a person to do that in the context of a same sex attraction.

So bottom line, interpret an experience through Scripture, first of all. And then second, just because I have a predisposition to do something doesn't mean God necessarily made me that way. We all deal with the consequences of the fall, and if we all started thinking like that, there

could be no temptation we wouldn't act on, Because we're blaming all of our temptations as God made us that way. What kind of a life would we be living? What kind of a world would we be experiencing if we do it that way?

Now I'll say one last thing, Mark. I don't mean this to sound callous. I know it probably does. If a person is same sex attracted, for instance, it could sound as though I, as a heterosexual, am saying that I, who am happily married, but choosing not to have affairs, choosing not to engage in pornography, choosing not to act on my heterosexual impulse, except with my wife, am just as tempted or am suffering just as much from my heterosexual inclinations as a homosexual that I'm hoping will remain celibate. I don't mean to say that.

Some of my heroes in this world are celibate homosexuals, people who are same sex attracted and choose to be celibate rather than acting on what they believe, and I agree, to be a sinful impulse. It's not a sinful it's not the desire. It's acting on the desire. The Bible nowhere, I think, condemns same sex attraction. It forbids same sex behavior.

I don't think it's a sin to be same sex attracted. I think it's a sin to act on that attraction, just as it's a sin to be heterosexually attracted and act in adulterous ways. But I do wanna say that to the degree I can understand, and I really can't, people who are same sex attracted and choose to be celibate deserve our admiration, Our respect, our encouragement, our support as a choosing to live biblically in what must be a very difficult expression of discipleship. And friends of mine who are choosing to do that are people that I respect greatly. So I've said a lot in response to all of that.

To boil it down, interpret experience through scripture rather than the other way around. Don't believe that every impulse you have is something God created you to act on. And if you are same sex attracted, understand that choosing to live celibacy by the power of god, by the power of the holy spirit, he will help You do that. You don't have to do it on your own. The Lord will help you do that as an expression of discipleship that is worthy of our respect and our support

[00:41:17] **Dr. Mark Turman:** So good. So good. And just as I hear that, as I think about that, that taken to its logical conclusion of if we start using that idea of, well, God made me this way, essentially, all the moral framework of right and wrong collapses. There's no way to even think about right and wrong. Hitler would just say he was doing what felt right to him. And all morality essentially collapses at that point.

Our I think we have maybe time for one more question. So this is big and can go in a lot of directions as well. We could spend a couple hours on this last question today, so here's the big question that, uh, has been asked before but comes back around through several sources, which is in the reading of the Old Testament is God guilty of genocide? How are we to understand the

holy wars of the Old Testament? Some might even say that you could read certain passages the Old Testament, and God is saying, you need to follow me or I'm going to eliminate you would be the way some people read the Old Testament. You can take this out along the lines of when you get to the New Testament, does the New Testament move to a nonviolent ethic, therefore calling Christians to be pacifists.

How do we think it's a big conversation, so pick it up wherever you feel led to pick it up. But how do you respond to some of the I mean, it's sometimes really hard to read the Old Testament and to see some of the things that happened and some of the things that God says.

[00:42:52] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Mhmm. Well, that's a very real question. It genuinely is because, I mean, there's just really no doubt the God, several times in the Old Testament, requires his followers, specifically the Jews, to respond to Canaanites in ways we wish he wouldn't, in ways that if we just were in charge of the story, we wouldn't have told it that way. It's one of the reasons I believe the Bible to be the word of God because it's so honest, so honest about the failings of its own heroes, Peter you think about David and Bathsheba. You think about Peter denying Christ, but also so honest in how God deals with us in ways that we sometimes are well, often struggle with.

You think of Saul in part losing his kingdom because he wouldn't annihilate the enemies of Israel to the degree that God wanted him to do that. You think of Joshua and the conquest and how they were described. They were required to eliminate the Canaanites that were in the land before they got there. You really do understand how people can wonder that. Then you come to the New Testament, and Jesus says, if you're somebody strikes you on the right cheek, turn him the other also.

And you think, well, you've got a New Testament God of love and an Old Testament God of wrath kind of a thought. And now you're almost a Marcian who's rejecting the Old Testament, and you almost kinda get these almost a dualistic sort of understanding of God and all of that.

Well, first of all, I think God is God. God hasn't changed. Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Malachi three, the Lord says, I, the Lord, do not change. God is the great I am, not the I was or I will be. His character doesn't change. And so we can't get to an Old Testament God of wrath versus a New Testament God of love because he is the same God. The same God who chose to have his Son die on the cross to pay for our sins is the same god who called the Jews to kill the Canaanites.

He is the same God. And you have to interpret the Old Testament in light of the New Testament, I do believe. I think that's a major hermeneutical principle. Progressive revelation. You'd add and subtract before you multiply and divide, before you do trigonometry, before you do calculus.

God's ultimate revelation is in Christ. So we pick up the New Testament as the means by which to interpret the Old Testament. Not to demean the Old Testament. It's just how we interpret the Old Testament. It's a hermeneutical principle that I think is really important.

So interpreting what God does with the Canaanites specifically in the context of Jesus' death on the cross and the full expression of God's love for us in Christ, a sacrificial love for us, then you come back and you learn some things about the Canaanites that are not obvious to us but were to them.

Now we're reading the Scripture in the light of its original context, which is always important to reading any book of literature, the Bible or anything else. You have to understand the context in which it was written.

The Canaanites, inhabiting the land the promised land before the conquest under Joshua, lived in ways, and I'm sorry to say this, but in ways that were horrifically immoral. Horrifically immoral. We know enough about them to know that. We'll know about the worship of the god Molech, who required child sacrifice. We know enough to know about the worship of Baal and Baalism, which required horrific sexual immorality in the worship of God and the gods. We know about horrible paganism, horrible idolatry, horrible immorality that was there on the part of the Canaanites that were in the land. These were not innocent passive people. These were people of horrific immorality.

We know on a second level, in the context of that day, and this is hard for us to understand sometimes, but there's a sense of retribution that existed in the ancient tribal world where if we don't destroy the Canaanites entirely, those that are left have a blood oath to destroy us. If you don't kill my entire family, those that survive are responsible for killing your entire family, and more than that, killing your whole tribe. It's a law of ascending punishment. That was the only way in a day when you didn't have national armies and police forces and objective morality and laws and all of that. The best way of protecting yourself was for everybody to know if you kill my family, the survivors are gonna kill your whole tribe. And if anybody from your tribe survives, they're gonna kill our whole legion of tribes. That's why the Bible's so revolutionary when it says an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, and it limits the punishment to the crime and limits the consequences to the criminal. That's such a revolutionary thing in the day and the time. I say that to say, if the Canaanites are not destroyed, those that are alive are going to do their best to destroy the Jews. And that's in fact what we saw happen.

We saw, first of all, their immoralities because they were allowed to infect the Jews. In large part, the Jews lost their Northern Kingdom because they adopted Canaanite practices. The Jews in the South fell into gross immorality and pagan idolatry because they adopted Canaanite practices. It's because they did not remove the Canaanites from the land that they fell into the very pagan

practices I've been describing. And it's because they did not do that that they had constant warfare with the Philistines and with other Canaanites that were there.

That's why the tribe of Dan that was given the south wound up in the north because they defeat the Canaanites in the south or chose not to do so. And so it makes more sense that God would, in this one point in history, call his people to remove the Canaanites, to destroy the Canaanites, lest they infect the Jews and unless they eventually annihilate the Jews.

Now one more thing to say. Ultimately, and this is another conversation for another day perhaps, God's ultimate purpose in establishing that nation was so that through them, he could bring the Messiah for all peoples, Canaanites and Jews. Now there's neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, we're all Abraham seed and heirs according to the covenant, as Galatians three twenty eight says.

So we have to keep God's saving purpose for the Jewish nation in mind. The only time in all of human history God ever called his followers to destroy a specific people was in the conquest. He didn't tell them to do that in Egypt. He didn't tell them to do that in the wilderness wanderings to get to the promised land. He didn't tell them to do that in Babylon.

In fact, told them to bless the people in Babylon. If you read Jeremiah twenty nine when by the time you get to the New Testament, the purpose of the Jewish nation has been fulfilled in bringing the Messiah. So now in the New Testament, God doesn't have to command his people to destroy nations. Now it's a different purpose in God's saving plan and program. He's not a different God.

He's not changed his mind. He's not reformed his character. He's not now a God of love where he wasn't before. The purpose for which establishing the nation existed is fulfilled in the coming of Christ. And so now we're no longer a nation warring against nations.

Now we're a people a chosen people, as first Peter two nine says. God's holy precepts that we're now sharing the good news with all nations to the ends of the earth. So we see God's statement to the Jews relative to the Canaanites in the context of the day, and as a means to an end, a bringing about a nation through whom Messiah could come for all nations. And now we understand better the specific uniqueness of God's specific commands relative to the Canaanites. I have papers on that that are on our website, specifically around that question.

Someone could find if they Google my name and that question, or they could get that in a larger conversation than we have time for today, but that would be a short version of the answer to a very complex question.

[00:49:59] **Dr. Mark Turman:** It is a big, big question and one for us to think about. And like I said that God is consistent and that God is consistently good as we talked about earlier, but also consistently just. And there's just so much that only God can comprehend and that God can rightly assess and God can rightly judge.

And we at some point, we have to trust in that. We have to trust in not only his reality, but also in his goodness. And that goodness most fully expressed to us in the coming of Christ to be our savior. That God was setting up this whole plan. As you often said, he became one with us so that we could be one with him forever.

[00:50:41] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Mhmm.

[00:50:41] **Dr. Mark Turman:** that that is the fullest expression, and it is through the revelation of Christ, through the story of Christmas and Easter, through which we should understand all that we can currently understand about God and about his desire for relationship with us, for salvation, uh, that it needs to be through that lens that we understand all that we can understand.

[00:51:08] **Dr. Jim Denison:** That's exactly right, Mark.

If I could add one thing very quickly there. I'm going to reject the gospel because I don't understand how God dealt with the Canaanites, what I'm rejecting is a God who died for me on the cross. That we have no question about. Judge the unclear and light of the clear. Judge what you don't understand in light of what you do understand.

If I could understand God, how could he be God? At the end of the day, my finite fallen brain can't fully understand the nature of an omnipotent omniscient God. But I would encourage anybody hearing this conversation who's struggling and understandably struggling with that, to judge what they don't understand in light of what they do, and know that if you're rejecting God because of the Canaanites, you're rejecting a God who died on the cross. And that ultimately is the final expression of God's love and grace for us and interpret everything else through that context just as you've said.

[00:51:53] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. Such a good word. Well, thank you for your time today. We could have ten more questions to deal with. But we wanna thank our audience for listening with us, and we hope it's been helpful to you and that it will equip you for not only a stronger personal faith, but for you to be that ambassador on behalf of Christ where God gives you opportunity and influence.

If today's been helpful, please rate review us on your podcast platform and share this with others. And as we've talked about several times, additional resources on all of these topics at denison forum dot org. And if you have any trouble finding resources that you're looking for, please send us an email at info at denison forum dot org. We have a capable staff that will help you to find the resource that you're looking for, and we look forward to having more conversation with you in the future. Doctor Jim. Thank you again. Have a great day, and we look forward to our next conversation.