

OpenTheo

#46 Big questions from and about children

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom answers listener questions on how to talk to children about tricky things like suffering and hell. Plus, we talk about parenting and disciplining children and young people

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Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast. Hello, and welcome along to today's edition of the show. I'm Justin Briley, Theology and Apologetics editor for Premiere, sitting down once again with the form of Bishop of Durham NT Wright, Senior Research Fellow at Whiglyphall, one of the world's leading New Testament scholars, and today's show brought to you as ever in partnership with SBCK and NT Wright Online.

And of course today's episode being released while the results of the US election are still as yet undecided, we're awaiting the final count of postal ballots in some key states. And there is a palpable air of tension about what conflict may result, whatever the outcomes are. So if you're listening from the US, our prayers are definitely with you as you navigate the aftermath of what's been a very divisive election.

And you can of course listen to Tom's thoughts recorded a month or so back about the

election here on the podcast. Well today on the show, we're looking at your questions about bringing kids up in the Christian faith. And you can ask questions yourself on any kind of subject really by simply registering at our website, ask NTY Right.com. I will be recording questions with Tom again soon.

So this is a good time to send your questions in. If you register, you receive the link to ask a question with your first welcome email. That's the way you can send your questions in.

And of course you get added benefits when you register, including being automatically entered into the competitions that we run. And since we're nearing our 50th episode soon, we thought we'd celebrate by giving away a bunch of Tom's books for our 50th episode. So simply go to ask NTY Right.com, get registered, you'll be automatically entered into that prize draw for our 50th episode, which is at around the two year mark actually, since we launched the show.

There's also ways to support the show there. I'm so encouraged whenever I hear of people who are being helped by this podcast, Christian and non-Christians actually listen to the show. And you can help us reach more people by supporting the show financially.

And as a thank you, we'll send you Tom's exclusive show ebook featuring his answers to 12 key questions about the Bible life and faith. So again, if you want to register or to give, go to ask NTY Right.com. Thanks for being with us on today's episode of the show. And I hope you enjoy the questions and answers that we're bringing you today.

Welcome back to this week's edition of the show. Always a pleasure to sit down with Tom, even if we are divided by a computer screen at the moment in these episodes, but still lots of good knowledge and wisdom and insight that we're able to bring your way across all sorts of different questions that come in. Remember, all of the questions that get asked of Tom are because people have subscribed to our newsletter and are then able to send their questions in.

Now, children and young people, obviously many of the listeners to this podcast are parents or grandparents, Tom, as are you. Tell us a little bit about your family on in that respect, how many children do you have? How many grandchildren? And what's the difference between being a parent and a grandparent? The usual line, which is a bumper sticker is if I'd known grandkids with this much fun, I'd have had them first. There is a bit of that.

Great thing about grandkids, of course, is you get to give them back. They're wonderful. But then when it gets difficult, somebody else's job, the theory at least.

Now, my four children are two sons, two daughters, ranging from mid-40s, I guess, Julian, my oldest son is 46 now, down to about 30. And so we had our four children within

seven years, which was quite some. Wow.

My wife is a saint. And each one of my four has one, except the last one, who has two with another one on the way. So we have four grandchildren and, sorry, five grandchildren and soon to be six.

And there was some debate among the grandchildren as to what sex they wanted, the new one to be, because we had two grand sons and two grand daughters, and then one other grand son. And so was this going to tilt the balance dramatically, or was it going to be? And it turns out it's going to be another boy. And I've actually got an in vitro photograph of him sitting just beside the camera here.

Oh, that's great. Helps me as I pray for this little as yet unborn child, morning by morning. So yeah, we've had an interesting time, family wise.

It's not been entirely easy. We've moved house a lot. They've moved schools.

They've done this. They've done that. We've had illness.

We've had different challenges, but here we still are. Absolutely. Well, we're not claiming again with this caveat to be specialists in child psychology or youth work.

But we're going to simply be drawing on your own common sense and experience, Tom, of as we look at some of these questions, both from parents with tricky questions that their young children have been asking them and generally on the principles of parenting as well and how that relates to scripture. So why don't we start with some tricky theological questions. I often find the hardest questions come from children because you sort of, you can't get away with the theological fudging.

You sometimes get away with an adult, don't you? But look, here's a great question from Will in Virginia. It says, "I have a three-year-old son who's been asking difficult questions lately. Why did God make mosquitoes? Why did God make outshoes? First, do you think it's responsible to say that all pain is a result of the fall? I used to think so, but now I'm not so sure.

Good Adam have stubbed his finger in the Garden of Eden. Did he get bitten by mosquitoes? If Adam went swimming, was he in danger of getting bitten by a shark? I'd like to have a well thought through answer to his questions and resources would be helpful as well. And he's also been asking questions like, "Why did God make the virus? Why did God make some people with no homes?" He's basically asking, "Why is there suffering in the world? How do you talk to a toddler though about these issues?" I've, it's very interesting where these questions come from and they're great questions.

Of course they are. But I think with these and with a lot of other questions that adults ask as well, there is a sense in the modern western world that we have got used to such

a comfortable lifestyle where basically things work. You can drive a car down the street, you can go shopping, you can do this, you can do that, you can have a quote normal life in a way that would have been absolutely unthinkable 200 years ago in the western world and is still unthinkable to the majority of the population of the world right now today where things are tough and bad things do happen all the time, etc, etc.

And I think we have got used to this idea of the world being basically a comfortable place and then if, "Oh dear, if Aunt Jane gets cancer when she's only 50," then, "How terrible that, how shocking and how good God allowed that," if you go back in history, the early church fathers knew perfectly well that most people died between the ages of, I don't know, 20 and 40 and that there were horrible sufferings and earthquakes and so on. And I think we have to distance ourselves from this bubble that we've lived in the last 200 years in the western world, which is basically the world is a nice place and, "Oh dear, there's one or two nasty things about it," and get back to the idea which is a much more robustly realistic idea that when we're talking about God making a good world, this doesn't mean it was totally perfect in all respects and then went horribly wrong, though there is a sense of which that's, there is some truth in that, but that God's plan was for a project that this was the start and God commissions human beings to take his project forwards and to make his world the place he wants it to be, which it wasn't yet. That plan gets aborted because of human sin so that instead of the world going in the direction that God wants and moving towards the completion of his purpose, a world in which the glory of God will fill heaven and earth together as the waters come at the sea, as the prophets and the Psalms say, instead of that, the things that needed sorting out in the world, many of them have not been sorted out and have got worse.

So somehow to talk about God's original creation as the beginning of a good project with humans as the people who are supposed to be helping bring it to where God wanted it to be, and that that going wrong means that there's all sorts of stuff which needs to be sorted out. This raises big questions about God fine. Let's have those big questions because the older I get and the more I study theology and the Bible and so on, the more I'm convinced that we learn about who God is by looking at Jesus.

And Jesus is not somebody who simply walks through creating a perfect world in all directions, but one who comes and shares the pain and sorrow of the world in order thereby to bring about God's eventual purpose of new creation. So even questions about Genesis, I want to say sooner or later we've got to bring them back to the Jesus question. What we learn about God by looking at Jesus and thinking, if this is what God incarnate looks like, what does that tell us about God's original purpose? That's tough, but I think actually children might be more up for that than some of them.

Well, perhaps, I still feel like that answer is the answer you would potentially give an adult Christian. Now, if it is your six-year-old grandchild asking you just one of these questions, why did God make mosquitoes? What would you say to your big girl

grandchild? I would say God made an extraordinary world in which there is an amazing food chain where different animals eat other animals and wear big fish, eat little fish and whatever it is. But that God seems from the glimpses we have to have wanted this world to be changed and transformed into the perfect world that he had in mind.

The language of project, I think even small children, children can get hold of that. This was the beginning of something with humans having being told, "Please, will you help me do this?" That's a very profound thing, but I think a child can get hold of the idea of adults wanting to do something and saying to the child, "I need your help to do this." We can get on with that. And if the child says, "No, I can't do that," then things that ought to happen don't happen.

Whether that solves mosquitoes or even wasps or whatever, that's a very different story. And I know that gets worse. Those questions get worse when there are some creatures whose whole existence seems to be all about getting inside other creatures and eating them from the inside and horrible stuff like that.

I don't know that we can get too far with that. Sooner or later we have to say, and we have to admit it to the children, these are huge and difficult questions. But the way we address those questions is by looking carefully at Jesus and at his compassion and at the way he took the worst that the world could do and took it on himself.

And so in a sense, you need the whole story in order to be able to answer the good but difficult questions. Josh in Idaho, USA, says, "I have a very curious and inquisitive seven-year-old son." He recently became a Christian and was baptized. He's got many very good questions on heaven and hell that I've been having a difficult time answering.

How would you suggest explaining the difficult questions of the afterlife to a seven-year-old such as, "Did God create hell? Where exactly is heaven? Did so and so go to heaven when they died? Do you have any recommended resources again on that?" Now we've covered these issues, obviously in previous podcast, Tom, heaven and hell. We've gone some nuance and detail on that. But again, it's about what do we say to the seven-year-old.

I'm a father of four and my youngest, my five-year-old. He's full of questions at the moment. Whenever we have a bedtime prayer, he wants to know, "Where is Jesus right now?" He's fascinated by this.

I've tried to get across the idea that Jesus was both born as a child, but Jesus also pre-existed being born as a child. His other question the other night was, "Was Jesus lonely before he got born?" I then tried to explain the concept of the Trinity, which I'm not sure how well I did. These are the things.

Kids have the natural questions that come. Well, let's answer Josh's question, but what

do you say in this instance to a child asking very obvious, very questions that need to be answered about heaven and hell, very literal, in a sense. Well, yeah.

Well, where's heaven? This is to the friend in Idaho who was asking these. I'm not sure if he or she has read my book surprised by hope, but that is where I've set out what the Bible actually teaches in relation to these issues. I know that in many parts of America, and perhaps this is true in Idaho, heaven and hell are absolutely the fixed things that Christians talk about.

The only reason for existing and for being a Christian is to go to heaven rather than to go to hell. And when we point out that in the Bible, God promises a new creation in which heaven and earth will come together, look at Ephesians chapter 1 verse 10, look at Revelation 21, look at so many passages which deal with this, then everything looks different and hell and heaven are not equal and opposite. We need to shake up our categories and this demands a major rethink, and it is difficult when talking to children, but actually I think the heaven and hell thing became popular particularly in the West through the insidious influence of Platonism in our culture where we all were taught that we had a soul, this was the secret bit of ourselves inside, and that the question was would the soul go this way or that? And this has had all sorts of knock on effects about bodily behavior because well it's only the bodies that doesn't matter because what matters is the soul, etc, etc.

And we need to teach our children that we are human beings made to live at the intersection of heaven and earth where our God dimension, our awareness of God and our awareness of the world and what we do and are in the world are supposed to be working together all the time so that when we have lived our lives in the present mode, then God will look after us, after our death, until the time when he renews heaven and earth together, we need to read Romans 8, we need to read 1 Corinthians 15, we need to read Revelation 21 and 22, and by not concentrating on those passages, the church has sold itself short and made its life more difficult. I have a friend who when his children were young and he was trying to explain these things to them, fastened on to the bit in Revelation 21 when it says that God will wipe away all tears from their eyes and he would say to, I remember to his daughter when she was, I don't four or five, that one day God will remake the world so that there will be no tears and every four or five year old knows about tears and this little girl bless her would then ask her questions in terms of daddy when we get to the no tears place, I really like that. A way for a child to say, this would be a place when nobody weeps because everything is okay, everything's happy, there's no more pain or sorrow anymore and so that's a very, if like an existential way of saying, God will make a new world and it will be wonderful and it'll be like this world only more so it will be that is physical and solid and exciting and dramatic and musical and beautiful only in ways that at the moment we can only just begin to imagine.

I've heard you say this before actually and I think it's really helpful and funnily enough,

you know, we've had very similar questions to these from our youngest and again it's our youngest who seems to have the most questions at the moment and and we've, I'll admit this, you know, we haven't really talked about hell at this point, we haven't, it hasn't come up, it's not a sort of something that's in their consciousness at this point but they're certainly the idea of what happens to people when they die is a frequent question and I've said, well, we believe that if someone trusts in Jesus, they're with Jesus and then and then so where are they now? Well and then I've moved on to talking about, well, we believe actually there'll be a day when we're, we're, we, this whole world is made new and now our five-year-olds, you piped up the other day with saying, oh, I'm really looking forward to the day when Jesus makes everything new again and I thought, okay, well, great. Now, I don't know if that means they're thinking I can't wait till my toys are on a made new again or something like that. Who knows how that's being interpreted in a five-year-old sort of mind but but we've, I suppose we've consciously tried as parents to not steer, steer the children away from a sort of very traditional, let's say, view of heaven is up there, we're down here and anti-mords looking down on us right now and try and give them a vision of this idea of a world to come where, as you said, there will be no more tears and so on and it seems to be going in at some level but very often I think if the adults don't really have a good idea of what that might be, it's going to be very hard to convey it to children, isn't it? Absolutely, if the adults are still thinking in terms of a platonic vision of souls going to heaven or possibly going to hell which we get from Dante, we get from Michelangelo, we get from a thousand sources over the last 500 years particularly in Western church history, then it's, if the adults don't get it, the biblical vision, then it's going to be very hard for the children to get it.

I think the important thing is that in the New Testament we are promised, Jesus himself promises and Paul promises that those who die in the Lord will be with him. Paul says, "My desire is to depart and be with the Messiah which is far better." He doesn't say it'll be in heaven, he doesn't say it'll be my soul, they're very reticent about what language they use which is interesting because other people writing at the time were not so reticent. I think reticent is appropriate and then the with Jesus thing is the thing to cling on to.

But then Colossians 3, Paul says, "and that God will bring them with him." Our life is hid with Christ in God when Christ who is, "Oh, your life appears, you will appear with him in glory." In other words, when the final end comes, then we will be raised to new life. Philippians 3 verses 20 and 21, which is important actually because Paul says our citizenship is in heaven and people often say, "Oh, that's where we're going back to." I heard a very distinguished theologian saying that not long ago. I said, "No, please get the exegesis right." The point is we are citizens of heaven currently on earth with a commission and Jesus will come from heaven to earth to establish his rule and reign here to bring heaven and earth together, not to take us away from earth to heaven.

Inevitably though, even in a relatively post-Christian culture, we're often fighting against

the sorts of images that will be on our kids' TV screens, the Simpsons with absolutely reinforcing the sort of the heaven-held sort of dynamic. And has the medieval mystery place indeed? Which I think is where we need to engage our children's imagination almost against that. We are both fans of C.S. Lewis, but I read my children and Arne stories because one of the best descriptions of heaven I find is in the last battle and that's a sort of way of helping, I think, to engage.

But we'll put a further up and farther in. Exactly, yeah. Justice, love, spirituality, beauty, freedom, truth.

These are ideals that we all strive for, yet so often we find ourselves falling short. Why is that? Broken Sign Post is the new book by Tom Wright, available now from SBCK, looking to the Gospel of John for answers and showing how Christianity provides us with the vision and resources for engaging with the questions posed by each sign post and points to a clear and compelling explanation of the world and of our role and responsibility within it. Also, you can join Tom and other SBCK authors for their annual lecture this November.

To do so, register free for the online event at sbckpublishing.co.uk. Let's turn to some other questions around this rather than specific questions that children have. These are adults asking about how we best parent children and let's go to this one about church, though, specifically Eren in Ahiyo says, "How do you think churches should integrate children into the body and include them in worship with adults? I'm part of a church that has one service for adults, another for college students, another for high school kids, etc. And these services are on different days in different buildings.

As a mum of three young children, age six and younger, it seems wrong, even unblibble-cool, that in this church, my children and I will never worship together. Do you see a place for children during church services? Should young children attend a Sunday school type class while the pastor preaches, etc. And finishes by saying, "I desire to worship and serve alongside my children and, for me and my husband, to be their primary disciples, but it seems that the church wants to delegate that responsibility to trained professionals." Yeah, yeah, yeah.

I resonate with this very strongly. When our first child was born, I reacted very badly to the idea that when we came to church, he would be often a different space and we would be in church. I wanted him there for us to be together precisely as a family.

Now, of course, with a small child, they cry, they disturb people. Some churches are very happy that that should be the case. Others find it very intrusive and it depends on the acoustics of the church and so on.

And certainly, if you've got crying babies around when somebody's trying to preach a sermon, that is very, very difficult. I still recall one or two services from the days of my

youth when I badly wanted to listen to a very important sermon and somebody just wasn't controlling their child sufficiently. And I would always now take a child out if it's crying for perfectly good reasons, if it's just being naughty, then maybe it needs to learn and come back in, whatever.

Once we had got to the point of having four children, I was very happy that somebody else would look after them for part, at least to the service, so that we could actually listen to the sermon, et cetera. And so I think however much one wants to be together and, ideally, in a healthy church community, there ought to be a time of all worshipping together, not just two minutes at the beginning and two minutes at the end, but a good solid block of time, which then can be differentiated. And different churches will have different ways of doing that.

I remember Sam Wells, who's now a vicar of the Samaritan in the Fields in London, saying that when he was in a parish in, I think, Norfolk, at one point, it got to the stage where, for various reasons, they had significantly more children in church than older people. And so they reversed the normal pattern. And at a certain point in the worship, the older people would go out to their class and the children would remain.

And the service was run as a children's service. And then at a certain point, the adults would come back in and tell the children what they've been doing, and all the children would say, "Ah." And just completely reversing the normal thing. That has a very powerful appeal to me too.

But I think one has to be creative. And the idea of different days and different buildings for different groups, that really worries me because it goes with the over specialization. Back to a previous podcast that we did, there are many churches today, which in order to be an effective church plant, have started off with people inviting people who are very similar to them, socio-culturally and ethnically and so on.

And then you get churches of the like-minded, who are all doing the same thing at the same time. And the whole point of the church is this should be a richly mixed human community. And one of the great delights of my time as Bishop of Durham was when we had a pilgrimage to Holy Island.

We went on buses and then we got out and we walked across the sands. We had the local television cameras there. And as one of my colleagues said, "Where else would you find a community with old ladies in their Wellington boots and mothers and toddlers and people of all ages, all doing something together, and then all ending up in church together for a little service on Holy Island?" And it makes you realize there are very few places in our world where that happens, where all age community is there.

And the church has something to model there which the world needs to see. So yes, we need to teach children, yes, we need to find wise ways of doing it, otherwise everyone

just gets frustrated. But let's not lose that vision for that whole all age community, which from time to time needs to be seen to be precisely that.

Yes, thank you. We've always felt that as well, I mean, honestly, in our church community, one of the wonderful things is to see a 90-year-old next to a 6-year-old and them talking, you know, and it's just so refreshing to see that. And as you say, very few places you actually see that happening.

Exactly. Where else in the world can you? Yeah. Well, let's go to another question.

This is the one from Will in Australia. And it's sort of how much do you censor the Bible for young children? So Will wants to say, what are some strategies for teaching kids about the Bible? I find it difficult to read many passages in the Bible to my preschoolers because they involve violence, sometimes even commanded by God, child sacrifice, destruction of Israel, hell, Roman torture, the wrath of the lamb. Typically, I'd wait until they're much older to expose them to movies with this kind of content.

But I'd like to be able to share with them the gospel message earlier in their life. I know, Tom, you were reading the Bible at four years old. So I mean, how much did you take in when you were a child, Tom, of that sort of part of the Bible in that? Yeah, I grew up in a church going family.

And yeah, I was given my first Bible when I was four and a half. And I just vaguely started to read it, but going to church, you hear bits of Bible and so on. And I started reading it seriously on a sort of properly organized basis when I was, I think, 12.

But not a bad time to start. I wish you'd have been a little earlier, but still. And I was never bothered by all that.

And I think sometimes we, over or underestimate what children are aware of and can take on board. I mean, an awful lot of traditional children's fairy stories or like Grimm's fairy stories and so on, they have pretty horrendous things going on. And these correspond to sort of children's nightmares very often.

And if the story resolves, then it actually helps the children supposedly. I'm not a child psychologist at all, but it helps the children to face the fact that, yes, there are fearful things. There are things that would really scare you, but this can be worked through and we come through the other side.

It's a really interesting point that you, if you simply look back at some of that more traditional children's fairy tale stuff, you're quite taken aback at. Modern children's preschool stuff is far more sanitized these days, isn't it? Yes, yes. I mean, little red riding hood and all that sort of thing.

These are pretty horrendous. They're the grandmother who turns into the wicked wolf

and so on. And I think children have ways of coping with that.

I'm sure there are PhDs who have been written about that and I haven't read them, but that doesn't worry me so much. When my children were younger, we had a particular children's Bible and we used to read it, you know, a double page spread every night with them and say prayers. And for whatever reason, this particular children's Bible included a double page spread of the story of Jephthah and Jephthah's daughter.

Oh right, gosh. Interesting choice. Well, I mean, I am working on a children's Bible at the moment and I'm afraid Jephthah's daughter is not going to feature.

There are also other things that feature and I've tried to work around that, but I used to turn over two pages at once when we got to that. I remember Rosamund Age, I don't know, three. Daddy, why did you turn over two pages quickly trying to change the subject? Because no, that is because I think the only way I can hold onto those myself as part of the Holy Scripture is by seeing the larger story.

And of course, the book of Judges ends with the emphasis that in those days there was no king in Israel and everyone just did what was right in their own eyes, which is a way of saying, wasn't it a good thing that eventually we got a king because this was a real mess. But of course, the stories of David and Solomon are not exactly clean and straightforward and so on and so on. And I think part of the point of all that over against again, a lot of sanitized Western theology.

Part of the point is to say that life is messy. It has mosquitoes, it has violence, it has bullies, it has bad people rampaging and good people often do get hurt in the middle of that. But the Bible story isn't about God who's made a wonderful world or we can sort of pretend that we're living in it.

It's about God himself coming and living in the middle of that messy world and taking its full pain on himself. And the crucifixion story needs to be presented in terms of strangely, the God who made the world came to take the worst that the world would do on himself in order to forge away through and out the other side into new creation, which is what the resurrection is all about. And that's that's going to be at the heart of it.

There's that strange little verse in Hebrews 2 which says that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death. That is the devil. We shouldn't be afraid of saying that.

That when all the death and destruction and horror is going on, not only in the Old Testament but obviously also in the new, then we believe that the whole story is about God coming and taking that death into himself in order to defeat it once and for all. And that's the centre of the whole biblical message. Basically everything else flows out from that.

Well, we're probably not in a position to give you many resources on these, but we know that there are many great resources published by the same publishers that publish your books of course Tom. So, yes, perhaps in the what I'll do is I'll make sure to include some resources that we think are good with the show notes from today's, because a few people have asked for resources for children here, Tom. But we'll include those in the... Yes, that's not my specialism.

There are people who know about that and I'm not one of them. Absolutely. But it's been helpful again to get your thoughts as a father, as a grandfather, and we hope there have been some help to those who are listening who are trying to answer those tricky questions from children and raise them.

But for now, thank you very much, Tom, for being with me on this episode. Thank you very much. Thanks for being part of the show this week.

Next time on the programme, female church leadership, complementarianism, marriage, egalitarianism, all those issues around gender roles that are often contested in church circles. Tom will be answering some of the questions you've sent in on that next time. So, look out for that in your podcast feed.

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