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#116 Questions about Surprised By Hope

May 4, 2022



Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom answers questions on his bestselling book 'Surprised by Hope'. Do certain Bible passages contradict the idea of a renewed earth? What method can I use to share the gospel? What is the fate of those who reflect God's love but don't believe? It the Kingdom of Jesus is here, why is the world still a mess?

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Transcript

Ask NT Wright Anything #podcast Hello and welcome back to the show. I'm Justin Briele, director of Premier Unbelievable, with the show brought to you in partnership by SBCK and NTWright online. We've got links to special deals for both our partner organisations with today's show.

And today on the show, Tom is answering questions on his best-selling book 'Surprised by Hope'. Do certain Bible passages contradict the idea of a renewed earth? What method can I use to share the gospel? What about the fate of those who seem to reflect God's love but don't necessarily believe? And if the Kingdom of Jesus is here, why is the world still such a mess? Great question coming up. And thanks to Rev Rand, who left this review of the podcast, said, "Love this podcast I've been trying to navigate my way

through following Jesus for many years and this podcast is a light forward for my faith struggles.

Thank you Bishop Tom for your thoughtful, reasoned and pastoral answers. Thank you very much, Rev Rand. If you can leave a rating and review on your podcast provider, it helps others to discover the show.

And if you want more great podcast and video material from Premier Unbelievable, we've have a brand spanking new, much expanded website now at premierunbelievable.com. Check out all our shows, including our newest podcast, The Matters of Life and Death podcast with bioethicist John Wyatt. You'll get a free ebook there if you join our mailing list. That's also the way to get a link to ask Tom a question too.

Again, that's premierunbelievable.com. And we're only, well, less than two weeks away from our big conference at the British Library in London. Unbelievable 2022. You can join from anywhere in the world, learn how to take God off mute and speak with truth and grace into an often confused and divided world with loads of great panel discussions and seminars that you can be part of with interactive Q&A wherever you are in the world.

Guests include Alistair McGrath, John Wyatt, Lisa Fields, Glenskrivener, Calvin Robinson, Joseph DeSouza and more, plus a big conversation between Sharon Dierichs and Ian McGill-Christ. It's going to be a great day. Unbelievable.live is the place to book your place.

The links are with today's show. Welcome back to the show. Today we're taking your questions on one of Tom's probably most famous and successful books, *Surprised by Hope*.

Tell us about *Surprised by Hope* firstly, very briefly what it encapsulates in terms of your thought and theology and what made you want to bring it out when it came out in, I think, 2007? Yes. When I was on sabbatical in Harvard in 1999, I was teaching a course on the resurrection of Jesus and I discovered in doing the reading for that and teaching, I think it was about 25 lectures or something like that, all sorts of misunderstandings which people had at a popular level and at an academic level about what happens after death and so on and about what the Christian teaching really is. Huge confusion about.

So when I was then appointed as Canon theologian of Westminster Abbey and they said, you know, you could be doing a course of lectures here and people in London would come. I said, well, how about I do something on life after death and resurrection and all that. So I did a course of nine lectures at Westminster Abbey in 2001 and then over the following years, including when I became Bishop of Durham in '03, I would take those lectures and do a set of either three or six or nine or whatever on the road in various locations and each time that they kind of got polished a bit and changed around a bit

and finally in 2000 and I think early 2007, I pulled them together and made it into the book that we now have.

So that was quite exciting really because I was able to incorporate the sort of questions that people would ask after I'd done the lectures and I think that's that major to more robust book as a result. Well, a lot of people have asked questions that stem from the book among the listeners of the show. So here's one from a listener in Nigeria called Kay who says, hello Tom, I've recently finished Surprised by Hope, thoroughly enjoyed it and was challenged by it.

However, I do have a question. Hebrews 13 verse 14 and 1 John 2 verse 17, how do you interpret those in light of the message of your book that heaven is not the final destination and that this earth is not utterly useless and so is so relevant to God that he will renew it. Thank you and stay safe.

Perhaps for those like me who don't have a photographic memory on these Bible verses, Tom, Hebrews 13 verse 14 and 1 John 2 17, do you want to sort of tell us what they say or summarize? I've got a text here, Hebrews 13 14 says, "For we do not have here a city which remains, but we seek the one which is to come." So it's the contrast of the present city, the present habitation and the future one. And then 1 John 2 17 says, "The world passes away and so does its desire, but the one who does God's will remains forever." Now, of course, it's easy if you take those verses without context to interpret them in what is basically a platonic sense. That is to say, the world here or the present city would be the space time universe that we know and where we live and then the one that is to come, you would think, "Aha, this must be a non-spacio-temporal, non-physical universe." But of course, within the Jewish world, this eschatological contrast, that sense of God's future which is promised to us, doesn't mean a non-spacio-temporal one.

There are some Jews who would push it in that direction like Philo of Alexandria in the first century, for instance. But most Jews, certainly of Paul's day, contrasting the present city and the future city would think of the future city as something which is pretty much like the present one in terms of being a space time and matter reality, but one which is now filled with the presence of God and a city where justice is done, a city where love and mercy abound and so on. Likewise, in John's letter and also in John's gospel, the word "wor" is one of those words which encapsulates several different things.

So when he says, "The world passes away," it doesn't mean that the good creation passes away. The good creation is what God made through the word. All things were made through him, says John chapter 1. And there is no sense that God's ultimate desire is to scrap all the all things that were made, but rather to redeem them as you find in, say, Colossians chapter 1, that great hymn about creation and new creation.

And new creation happens because of redemption. And the thing that passes away is the world which is full of corruption and decay. It's pretty much like Revelation chapter 21

when it says, "The first heaven and the first earth had passed away and I saw a new heaven and a new earth." And most commentators on Revelation say, "This doesn't mean a total discontinuity.

It doesn't mean that God will totally scrap everything in the present and make something day novo. It's rather a new creation out of the old." And what passes away is the corruption, decay, sin, death, deadliness of the old. And the word "world" can be used by John to encapsulate that negative sense, rather like in Paul the word "flesh" encapsulates the negativity of corruption, sin, and decay in the present human condition.

But that doesn't mean that the resurrection will not be a resurrection of the body, a resurrection to a physical spatiotemporal reality. So it's really important to understand the way in which our minds in the Western world particularly have been so infected by that platonic antithesis of physical and non-physical, and instead to replace that with the present corrupt physicality and the new non-corrupt physicality. And obviously in the process of putting these ideas sort of in a way unveiling the biblical sense of what that world will be, you've helped to broaden a lot of people's sense through surprise by hope especially of what the gospel is, of what the kingdom message is, not simply a sort of escape hell and go to heaven, sort of when you say this particular prayer.

But this does present problems for some people who are kind of struggling to kind of come into a sort of a broader understanding if you like of what that means for the way that they present the claims of Jesus and faith to people. Jodi for instance in Wisconsin, USA says, "My husband I recently completed surprise by hope. Now we grew up in a Christian religious environment that shared the gospel with concepts similar to, 'Well if you were to die tonight, do you know if you would go to heaven or hell?' Now realising this question leaves out how the gospel impacts our lives now and that the new creation and resurrection are different than maybe we thought before.

Could you give us an idea of replacement question or concept for when sharing the good news with others? So if that's been their sort of formula before Tom, can you offer a new formula or question a way into those conversations? I very much understand that. I am congenitally worried about formulae because humans cannot be captured with formulae and when we're wanting to share the good news of Jesus with people, we do need to be sensitive to particular situations and not simply say, 'Here's the standard question, here it is bang' because that can be very, very unhelpful. However, I would say the gospel of Jesus is not, 'Here's how you go to heaven.' The gospel of Jesus is, God raised the crucified Jesus from the dead and thereby launched a new world, a new creation and are you already part of that? Would you like to be part of God's new creation? Is that something that appeals to you or are you determined to turn your back on the good creator who now is doing his new creation? And I would want to explore questions like that and put the positive because Jesus is Lord, Lord who has rescued and renewed the old creation and is now a master minding the project of new creation and inviting people

to share it with him.

So it's not just about where are you going to end up. It's, are you going to be part of the team? Are you going to be batting for the right side? Are you going to be embracing your vocation as somebody who is called to be part of God's new world? Because you can, through the death of Jesus, leave behind the world of corruption and sin and decay and everything that's messed you up so far and you can be part of this new world and that can happen right now and on into the future. So out of that nest of ideas, I would want prayerfully, if I was talking briefly with somebody in a particular situation, I would want to select what would seem appropriate for that occasion from that whole area.

Yes, I mean, as you say, perhaps there has been value in sort of very sort of step by step approaches to evangelism in some contexts. But at the same time, often that can hand people a very one dimensional faith at the same time if that's the way they accept it. And we just have to live with the fact that sometimes things aren't quite as simple as we would like to sometimes have them presented to us.

Oh, quite. And I do want to say, God can use and has done and will use all sorts of stumbling halfhearted attempts, including my own, to bring people to faith. And God is gracious and doesn't wait for either the evangelist or the person concerned to get it all absolutely right.

All that needs to happen is something about the love of God in the death and resurrection of Jesus reaching out and grasping somebody. So the proper response then is, as Paul says, the son of God loved me and gave himself for me. And if somebody even has a smell of that and can respond to that, then there's all sorts of theology which can come in and help them as they move on from there.

But you don't have to know the whole theory before you can actually have what we loosely call saving faith. And let's go to another question which involves, in a sense, the fate of non-Christians. Jan has this question, having read "Surprised by Hope." She wants to ask about your theory about the fate of non-Christians at the final judgment.

I'd like to ask what Tom thinks will be the fate of those who do not worship money, sex, power, or God, but actually prioritize kindness to others, integrity, honesty, and justice. Do they bear the image of God sufficiently that even if they don't acknowledge or worship him? I suppose the question from Jan is, will we see them as part of the kingdom even if they haven't explicitly acknowledged God, but they haven't, don't seem to sort of have gone in the direction either of worshiping money, sex, and power and so on. Yeah, yeah.

Of course, one of the things one always ought to remind oneself of is that we are not God, and that this is God's business as to who is part of the kingdom and who isn't. That's not to say we slide back into a kind of relativism where, well, it doesn't much

matter because God's going to do what he's going to do anyway. But I'm reminded of that remarkable moment in Mark 12 when Jesus sees that one of the scribes has answered wisely and says, "You're not far from the kingdom of God." The scribe has got hold of something even though he's not actually signed up to being a follower of Jesus or not at the moment.

Who knows? And in the gospel stories, we meet other people who are well spoken of. There's the centurion who the Jewish people say, "He's a good guy. He really loves our people.

He built our synagogues. So please renew come and do what he wants in terms of healing his slave," and so on. And then there's Cornelius in the book of Acts who has been fasting and praying and seeking God as best he knows how, even though he's not Jewish and even though he's certainly, until Peter comes and visits him, doesn't know about Jesus.

And so throughout we are being nudged towards saying what theologians have said through the use of the phrase common grace. I don't much like that phrase, but that God's love in creation reaches out and opens up. And there are many, many people who say, "Actually, this is the way we should live.

I have a sense that we are supposed to be people of mercy and kindness and goodness." And sometimes tragically there are people who are professing Christians but who show almost no mercy and love and generosity and wisdom. And so that's when wise people, I think, say, "This is actually God's business. Our task is to make Jesus known by what we do and what we say." And if we find that there are people who already seem to be living that way, well, tremendous.

The missionaries who in the 19th century went out into far-flung foreign lands in ways that it's hard for us to imagine today because we can cross the world so quickly and internet, et cetera. Missionaries regularly would come back and say, "This was really interesting because when we talked about Jesus and about the new life which was available, some people would say, "We always knew there was something like that. Thank you for making it explicit." And that's very different from somebody who says, "I've never believed anything like that, but suddenly, bang, I'm getting converted." And I think God moves in many mysterious ways.

And we have to allow for that without in any way relativizing the central fact of Jesus, as though Jesus was just one way of being good or one way of becoming part of God's people or something. The message of Jesus remains absolutely central and decisive, but the boundaries of God's love are no doubt much more widely thrown than some Christians like to imagine. Well, our final question on today's show comes from Elisiray, who's in Pennsylvania, and again, comes on the back of having read, "Surprised by Hope," and it's prompting a lot of questions.

Elisiray says, "Thanks for the podcast. Listening to anti-right sort process on a variety of issues has opened my eyes to ideas about my faith and God's relationship to the world that I'd never been exposed to before. I've now come to realize many of the beliefs I took for granted as universally Christian are actually uniquely American and not necessarily healthy or theologically based." Well, my question is related to what Tom covers in "Surprised by Hope" and our workers' Christians in cultivating God's kingdom, which is already here through Jesus.

I believe Tom's correct, however, what I've been wrestling with is this. Previously, the issue of evil in the world philosophically hadn't bothered me so much because I know I'm living in a fallen world. What I'm having trouble reconciling now is this dichotomy of living in a fallen world, but also God's kingdom already having been established here.

How can God's kingdom already be here and evil be just as prevalent as before Jesus came? And I know we've tackled this in one or two ways in the past, but perhaps we could revisit it for the sake of Elisiray and this sort of, yeah, she's struggling with how to put those two things together now. Yeah, sure. And thanks to Elisiray for articulating it so sharply, because I think many of us grew up with this idea that, "Oh, well, we live in a fallen world, so evil is going to go on and on and on," but fortunately God has prepared a totally different, better place called heaven and one day all his people will go and join him there and then that'll be all right, won't it? And against that, we have to put these interesting old books called Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, which make it quite clear that Jesus is saying the kingdom of God is at hand.

And when he says the time is fulfilled, he doesn't mean it's nearly fulfilled, he means the time is up, this is the prophetic moment, the new thing is happening here. And when people said to Jesus, as we find people saying today, it looks as though the world is going on the same way, Jesus told stories about a farmer going out and sowing seeds in the field. And then somebody else comes along and so is a different kind of seed and the evil and the good ones grow together until the harvest, but the good ones are growing.

And in the original parable of the sower in Mark 4, 1 to 20, for instance, you have seeds which do different things because of different soils, but some falls in good soil and brings forth fruit 30 fold, 60 fold and 100 fold. Now, here's the thing. We in the modern West are very used to looking around the world and imbibing the rhetoric of the secular enlightenment, which says that actually Christianity has basically failed.

The world is just the same as it always was, if anything worse, because Christians are bigots and they do stupid things and they fight wars, etc, etc. All of that is true, of course. But when you look at the whole sweep of history, I'm thinking here, for instance, of the work of someone like Tom Holland, who's made this point very strikingly recently, you can see quite dramatic shifts in public perceptions.

I mean, we at the moment are faced with this horrible thing of the war in Ukraine, but

the fact that we most people in the modern Western world and around the rest of the world look at it and say, this is inhumane, it shouldn't be allowed, what can we do to stop it, shows that the consciousness of the world has actually radically changed. In the first century, people would say, well, that's just what Terence do and there's nothing you can do about it. And the fact is that was the same with apartheid, that many people in days gone by would have said, well, that's just how people choose to be.

But the world as a whole got together and said, this is not the way that we should treat human beings. Where did that instinct for what we now call human rights come from? Of course, there is a secular agenda of human rights, but that secular agenda is borrowed directly from the Jewish and Christian worldviews, which have soaked into the consciousness of the world. That is an extraordinary phenomenon, a historical phenomenon, which we shouldn't downplay.

So though there is, of course, a huge raft of stuff still to do, not least because many Christians in the modern world have been Platonists who've said, don't worry about the present state because we're off out of here. This world is not my home, I'm just passing through. There have been many who've said that's not good enough.

The God we worship, the God who made heaven and earth is a God of justice and mercy who wants his justice and mercy to be seen in all the earth as far in advance as we can of the eventual new creation which he will make. And that's part of the gift of the spirit. Jesus says in John 16, is that through the spirit, and Jesus follows are to convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment.

Like Jesus arguing with Pontius Pilate in John 18 and 19, we are to be a community that in our life and by what we say to those in power holds up a mirror and says, this is how God's world ought to be run. You are doing it wrong right now and we are going to pray for you and work with you to see if we can do it better. So yes, it is an ongoing problem, but it is precisely the problem which Jesus was addressing with those seminal parables, seminal both in the sense of seminal for his teaching and because they are to do with the sea men, the seed, the seeds growing secretly, the seeds which have been planted, which are already producing a great deal of fruit, a great deal more than we are often aware of.

And you could add, I suppose, to that parables around the yeast in the dough and these things take time. It is not as though it is an instant sort of effect that takes place. Thank you so much, Tom.

It has been really helpful. Four questions there from Nigeria, a couple from the USA and elsewhere that you have answered on surprise by hope. By the way, surprise by hope continues to be sell well wherever it can be found.

So if you want an introduction to Tom's thought and theology on the whole idea of new

creation and what it means to to see this kingdom in there now, then that is a wonderful place to start. But for now, thank you very much, Tom, for being with me on today's show. Thank you.

Hey, thank you for being with us. Next time, Tom responds to someone who says they can't seem to shake their sinful addiction. He's answering pastoral questions from listeners about how to develop spiritual disciplines, how to escape the cycle of besetting sin and how to respond to homeless people with substance addiction and mental health problems.

We really do appreciate you taking the time to listen to this show. And if you want to check out more, do go to our website at premierunbelievable.com. And if you aren't yet booked in, do consider joining us for Unbelievable the Conference 2022 on Saturday the 14th of May. It's a chance to ask the kind of questions we tackle each week on this show and to really engage in a more confident faith in today's world.

Again, you can attend from anywhere in the world and be part of it at unbelievable.live. See you next time.

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