

OpenTheo

#39 Will animals go to heaven?... and other questions on new creation

June 30, 2020



Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom answers listener questions on heaven and new creation. Will free will still exist? DO near Death Experiences tell us anything about it? Will we be reunited with our loved ones... and even our pets?

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Transcript

[Music] The Ask NT-Ri Anything podcast. Hello and welcome back to the show. I'm Justin Briley, Theology and Apologetics Editor for Premier, bringing you the program where you get to ask the questions of Tom Wright, a.k.a. NT-Ri It's an academic, a theologian, former commissioner of Durham, and a jolly nice guy as well.

This program is brought to you in partnership with SBCK and NT-Ri It's another edition of the show which was recorded in pre-lockdown conditions, pre-coronavirus conditions. Today's show on new creation, heaven and will our pets get there? So let's see if your question maybe comes up if you sent one along those lines. The way to be able to actually submit a question for the podcast is by going to our web page and registering there.

You'll get our newsletter as well, bonus content, latest news and that kind of thing but you'll also get the link to ask a question too. That's at askNT-Ri It.com. But even if you don't want to ask a question, you're just happy to listen. You'll enjoy the content if you subscribe to the newsletter.

It was pleased to see as well during lockdown. Tom has been broadcasting a great deal from his office at his home in Oxford and those cavernous bookshelves behind him. Some people have said they'd love to just get a walkthrough with Tom of his bookcases which maybe we'll do on the show at some point.

But I was very pleased to see that book shelf credibility, bookcase credibility, which is a sort of slightly tongue-in-cheek Twitter account that has started since the beginning of lockdown because of so many people appearing in their offices via Zoom, via meeting conference software with bookcases behind them and commenting on the nature of their bookcases and what it says about them. Well, Tom was featured recently on that Twitter account. A hundred thousand subscribers said Twitter accounts.

It's it began in March. And it says, Tom Wright, "Ach haverness amount of credibility here. The books are like bats roosting on the walls of Tom's mind.

A few flutter about behind him, like stray thoughts. The lamps, one on and one off. Tell us that we must choose areas to illuminate our mind works best when focused." So I thought that was great.

Tom, a famous last as he's been featured on the bookcase credibility Twitter account. Anyway, we ran a competition recently, a little while back for three signed copies of Paul Biography. We do this for anyone who's basically subscribed to our newsletter list.

You will be automatically entered into any competitions we run through the year. Well, well done to Pastor Matthew Anderson, Mark Cannon and Brandon Hatch, who are all winners of those copies of Paul Biography signed by Tom himself. If you want to make sure you're in the running for any future competitions, as I said, do get yourself signed up to the newsletter list at askentiright.com. For now, let's hear some of your questions.

[Music] Well, you join us again for another edition of the show as we ask your questions. This week about new creation and some questions about animals and heaven. And the phrase "heaven" I'm sure will come into question as well.

And given that we are going to be talking about pets and animals, I was wondering if you ever had pets or anything common in your house. Actually, not much. When my kids were younger, they went through a rabbit phase.

Okay. And as I've heard people say in other contexts, they were nice when they came and they were nice when they went. [Laughs] It was nice when they went.

And there was some good stuff about that. But because of allergies in the family, et cetera, we've never had either cats or dogs. And that's just the way it is.

I'm sometimes jealous of people who do because it looks fun and interesting in another dimension. And likewise, we've never been in the position where we could have, you

know, ponies for the kids or whatever. We've just never done that.

I have to say, we're a similar sort. The pets that we have at home are the least... Take the least amount of work you can imagine. They're two leopard geckos.

And they're native to Pakistan, but they live in a little vivarium in our... And you can go away for a week and not worry about them because they store all this fat in their tail. And as long as they've got water, they're fine. And you just feed them once or twice a week with live grasshoppers.

That's what we put in. And it's great fun watching them stalk their prey when they do it. They're very low maintenance.

And that works well for us. Our lives don't really extend to having a high maintenance sort of pets. So that's our perspective on this.

But many people are very attached to their pets and animals, almost, you know, like extended families. So we'll come to some of those questions later. But let's start off because we... You're well-known, Tom, for your work on what's often called new creation, a new way of understanding what that kingdom is to come, how we're meant to understand the language of heaven and so on.

But here's someone who I suspect is rather at the beginning of starting to grapple with your work here. Priscilla in Michigan has got in touch, says, "I'm 72, and the older I get, and the more I'm worried about dying. I've always believed in heaven, and I would have me at home by the sea with all my dogs and loved ones.

But how do I know for real when I die, I will enter heaven? Where is everyone that has died? Are they still alive somewhere? I have a friend who's an atheist and believes death is the end of us. I don't believe that. Everyone tells me I have to have faith, and because it says to do so in the Bible.

I've read the Bible. I know what it says. But it's God going to punish me for questioning why can't my dead loved ones communicate and tell me where they are? Am I losing my faith? There's a lot of stuff wrapped up there.

Priscilla's question. But an overall sense of obviously being a bit scared of what's actually on the other side and how can she know she'll be safe? Absolutely. I want to say to Priscilla, you're only a few months older than me, and these are perfectly good questions.

You're not losing your faith, and God is certainly not going to punish you for questioning. God has given us minds to inquire. Although as G.K. Chesterton said, "The purpose of an open mind is like the purpose of an open mouth, namely to shut it again on something solid." So let's see if there's something solid in here.

And though you obviously have read the Bible, the trouble with so many Bible readings in our day in the Western world, as I go on saying, is that we assume that the question is about what happens to me after I die, and is there a place called Heaven, and will I get there? But the whole point of the Bible, Old Testament and New, is that the God who made the world wants to bring Heaven and Earth together and to come and live with us in that new creation. So the point is not to leave this world and go to somewhere called Heaven. The point is that with Jesus and through His Spirit Heaven has come to Earth, and is if you like colonizing Earth, though Earth is a bit recalcitrant and difficult, etc., etc.

And the point about the ultimate promises, such as the end of Revelation, about the New Jerusalem coming down from Heaven to Earth, is not that we go upstairs, but that God's reality comes down to meet us. So that we have to think in terms of a biblical forward look in which there is ultimate new creation, which is a Heaven and Earth combination, a total transformation of everything, and then in between our death and that new creation. There is a mystery, and the Bible is very reticent about that mystery.

So it's not surprising that people find it difficult to grapple with. What happened, and really part of the conditioning of Priscilla and many, many others like her, and I meet this if I take a funeral and people say, what I want to know is, where is she now? Because in the Middle Ages they believed in purgatory in the Western world anyway. They believed that when people died, almost everyone went into a place of purgation where they were cleaned up, which was very painful and difficult, and it might last a long time, and then eventually you might be allowed into Heaven.

And the Reformers in the 16th century said, no, no, no, no, that's a Catholic myth, just to keep you in your place and to stop you being bad. Actually, death finishes everything that is wrong with you so that after death they said, then you'll go straight to Heaven. So as Karl Barth, the great 20th century theologian said, the Reformers never really sorted out their eschatology.

They never really figured out how resurrection relates to the medieval vision of Heaven, and the problem is with the medieval vision of Heaven, which we have then tried to do in a different way in Western Protestantism. So I want to say, God will make a new creation in which the present creation and everything that is beautiful and powerful and lovely and glorious in our present world will be transformed and enhanced and celebrated in new ways that at the moment we can only just begin to glimpse. So we do see it a bit through the experience of human love, through art, through music, etc.

And so Priscilla's lovely thing about wanting a home by the sea with all my dogs and loved ones, yeah, I get that. But actually, what we're told is that after death, if we are believers in Jesus, we will be with Christ, which is far better. And that's about it.

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, something about being away from the body and at home with the Lord, but actually longing not to be disembodied, but to be re-embodied. She

says not to be unclothed, but to be more fully clothed. And to give Priscilla her credit there, whatever she means by that phrase, I'd love to have me at home by the sea with all my dogs.

She's recognizing that I like this aspect of reality. I don't quite want to be a disembodied angel feeding in an unclaritual realm. And I think today there's a big reaction against traditional views of heaven of just sitting on a cloud playing a lot forever and ever.

There was the far side cartoon about the guy sitting there sitting there sitting here, which I brought to magazine. There are many atheists who believe that death is the end. That's an ancient worldview, goes back to Epicurus and others in the ancient world.

And humanly speaking, when you see a body either going through cremation or whatever, it looks as though that's it. And part of the message of the gospel, which has deep roots throughout scripture, is that actually know the love of God is more powerful than death itself. And that in Jesus we see that reality, which is spoken of in the Old Testament, coming to life.

But then how we talk about the life between human death and human resurrection remains, but, strictly speaking, very mysterious. There are different images of which being with Jesus is probably the best one. And in John 14, Jesus talks about many dwelling places.

And that's a way of saying, it's going to be okay. I will look after you. You may not, we don't have language at the moment to talk about how he will look after us.

And the New Testament, interestingly, never talks about a soul, which goes to heaven. Some Jewish writers did, but the New Testament doesn't do that. Isn't that strange? Well, we're going to ask you to sort of try and have a guess at what that foggy signposts are that have pointed into what that might look like.

Because people inevitably have questions about what this future new creation, how it will be manifest, what it might look like. Michelle David actually comes in with two questions here. I'll go for the resurrection of the dead question.

It says, "Look, if my body has decayed and my atoms have gone on to become other things, plants, even other people and inanimate objects, how will I be reconstituted? What is essentially me in this new resurrection place?" It's a wonderful question. And this question was faced in more or less exactly those terms in the second century AD and second and third century, Tertullian discusses it and Origen discusses it. And much later, C.S. Lewis picks it up in his book *Miracles*.

And he says, "Hey, you know, just as fingernails and hair and skin itself is all in a process of flux." It was news to me when I read Lewis for the first time that our bodies changed their entire molecular kit roughly every seven years. I am not the same person physically

at all that I was when I became professor in St Andrews ten years. It's a bit like that old philosophical puzzle about a boat leaves port and goes into another one a year later.

And in the meantime, every single part of the boat is really fitted and is it the same boat that arrives? Grandfather's old spade that had three new handles and two new blades, whatever. And Lewis has this lovely image. He says, "We are to that extent like the curve in a waterfall.

There is continuity of form, but discontinuity of matter. "And matter is pouring through us." And so it's not a big deal for God to say, "Oh, now, didn't you once own that molecule and this molecule?" And if you took that to its literal conclusion, there would have to be seven versions of you because of all the molecules that make you up. Exactly.

And this stuff is all shared around. We've got some grapes and bananas and bread on the table here. And they use molecules which have been circulating and doing different jobs and so on.

And that's how it is. And if we're to believe in resurrection, we are believing in new creation, that God will give us an appropriate body which will be clearly and recognizably ourselves, but much more so. The image that I've often used, and it's based on 2 Corinthians 5, is that if you meet somebody who's been very sick, you might say, "Oh, poor old son, so it's just a shadow of his former self." But the point is, if you are in Christ and dwelt by the Spirit, you are right now just a shadow of your future self, that there is a real you which is much more like you, a kind of a vivid in color and so on.

And presumably which Christ in his resurrected state gives us an image of. Yes, of course. Which is why the resurrection appearances are so extraordinary because at the one hand it is clearly Jesus, but at the other hand, he seems to be changed.

One of the most mysterious things in John 21 is when John says, "None of them dared ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord." They've been with him night and day for three years. They knew him perfectly well. They knew him better than I knew.

But there's a sense that it's you, but you're different. And yet, obviously physical too. They're a pain to point that out.

Oh yes, very much so because they eat some ghostly. Exactly. And this is the mystery of new creation.

It's a heaven plus earth reality. And for us, it's very difficult to think of immortal physicality. Everything around us, these microfilters, papers, table, you could break it all down, but actually there will be an immortal physicality.

The sort of scientist in me, my dad's a biochemist, wants to ask, "Will that mean that in some way the rules of physics change in this new creation?" I don't know. I don't know. I know.

I know. I know. There's a perfectly fair question, but I don't think we really know.

Here's another interesting one from Michelle. I'll give her two bites of the cherry. "Free will and love on the new earth." What will stop people from hurting others in this new, renew world? If there is still free will, which is required for meaningful love, when people be free to sin, what will make us different from the first humans who were given an opportunity to sin and chose to do so? Yeah.

The book of Revelation seems to me to address this when it talks about Satan being released from bondage for a short time and then finally being thrown into the lake of fire. It's a way of saying we can imagine the possibility that it would just be a cycle going round and round and we'd sin again, etc. But actually, God is going to take care of that.

I think the problem there lies with the understanding of free will, that when I truly love somebody, it's the most free thing that I do, and in a true relationship of love, there is wonderful freedom. But the freedom is not freedom to hurt them, to slap them in the face, to mistreat them. That's an abuse of freedom, not the use of freedom.

And I think I want to say there is a genuine freedom, which isn't the random freedom of "I can do what I like," but it's actually free to be who we truly are, so that there will be a true sort of freedom, which will be expressed in an infinite variety of creativity. I mean, unfreedom would mean we're just on a treadmill going round and round. Freedom doesn't mean unfreedom because sin is not freedom.

Sin is a form of slavery. And so the notion of free will is a bit more complicated than we normally think. But I think, therefore, in the new world, what we will be and who we will be will be a glorious expression of the infinite creativity of God's love.

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Here's another sort of practical question about what exactly heaven is. Breton Atlanta, Georgia, says, "Thanks for all your work, especially the books." By the way, I should always say, if you ever don't hear me quoting people introducing their question with, "I love you, Tom." It's usually because I've just wrote it out. We can assume that everyone is a big fan.

But anyway, question though, what do you think of people's near-death experiences where they claim to have seen heaven? Do you think it's possible they have seen and experienced the heavenly realm? Some of the people who claim these stories are quite credible in their work lives and highly educated and adamantly stick to their stories. We've seen actually quite a few books published along this idea of someone who claimed to have died, had some near-death experience, seen some vision of heaven. So, yeah, what do you make of those and how does that relate if it is credible to the new creation? I had a pupil when I was teaching in Canada who had been working with their Canada because during the war he'd been an airline pilot, a fighter pilot, and had been shot down and was clinically dead, and had had an experience like that, where he almost went and was then actually told, "You've got to come back at what things you to do." So he went and then worked for the airline, but it always knew that when he'd finished raising his family he was going to go into ministry, and he was about to be made a vice president of a Canada, and he went into the office and said, "No, handing him my notice." And I was teaching him New Testament Greek, which happened at the age of 40 or something.

It obviously got into purgatory. Well, it was quite difficult at that age, but I mean, for him this was a moment of vocation, and I have apps in no reason to doubt that. But what I want to say is we are not, I don't think we are given in this life, a kind of actual portrait of what the future will be.

I think there are moments when people who have ministered more than I have with people on their deathbeds will say that very often somebody who is lingering between life and death seems to be experiencing something of seeing and meeting people. It's impossible to tell, I think in terms of psychology and physiology, whether that is simply the fantasies of a mind that is actually close to death, or whether it is actually a reality. I'm perfectly happy to say that God can use even the fantasies of a diseased and sick brain to reveal things to people.

Why not? So I don't want to say this then enables us to say this validates the normal Western assumptions about heaven, but I want to say yes, it may well be that God is giving these people a vision that whatever happens to them, he will love them, it will be wonderful, he will look after them. There is a whole new world waiting, but it shouldn't be allowed to undermine the biblical teaching, which is not about going to heaven, but about new creation. That's the danger that these stories are just there it is, so just wait around for death because it's all going to be glorious afterwards.

It reminds me of that moment, you'll have to give me the exact Bible reference, but is it Paul who says I knew a man who talked about being taken up? Oh, I knew many Christ's, with his twelve years. And people think that probably was Paul, he kind of eluded himself in that. But that's a vision, it wasn't a sign.

As we know it wasn't what we would call a near-death experience. But yes, Paul is rather keen to say, "Yeah, I know a chap to whom, by the way, I'm not allowed to tell you what he saw and he heard words, but I'm not allowed to tell you what he... That's a way of saying to the Corinthians, don't get fixated on this stuff. Amazing visions happen and yes, I've actually had some, but the most important thing was I got the thorn in the flesh.

Yes, no, I get that. Good. Okay, here's another interesting take on this, and I'm not expecting you to have read the book or seen the TV series.

In fact, I've read the book a long time ago, but not actually caught up with the TV series. Tim in Atlanta, Georgia says, "I've read your book, Tom, evil and justice have gone three times and taught an adult formation class on it at my church. But recently I watched the series on Amazon, Good Omen's, based on a book by Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett.

While beautifully done as a piece of fiction, it draws heavily on Christian eschatology. The overarching theme of the series is that the world is pretty much okay as it is, and evil does not need to be defeated in the end because that would actually destroy the world and all the good things in it. Does Tom have any opinion on the series or words of advice for people who want to discuss the problem of evil or eschatology with those who think the world is okay the way it is? I'm going to assume you haven't read the book or seen the series.

I'm afraid I haven't. I don't watch a lot of stuff on screens and I haven't read the book. But it seems to me that to those who have even a short memory, and my memory only goes back to the middle of the 20th century, but anyone who could remember most of the 20th century would just say, "You've got to be kidding.

We have seen immense evil. The First World War, when you look at what happened and why it happened and how it worked out, it really does seem to be more than the sum total of all the foolish actions and decisions of all the people involved. Seems to have been a rushing together of folly, blindness, inhumane stuff, etc.

And then when you look at the 1930s and see both what was going on in the Soviet Union and what was going on in Nazi Germany, and then you say the world is basically alright as it is, as though a little bit more education will all be alright. I'm sorry, there are deep things wrong in the world. The rise of Islamism as a modern phenomenon.

It's not like ancient Islam, it's Islamism. That has all sorts of signs of a deep sickness which is partly a response to the arrogance of Western culture, etc. We're wrestling with

enormous issues.

We were talking in a previous episode about climate change and so on. I find it extraordinary that anyone would say the world is pretty much okay as it is. Now of course, if you then swing the other way and produce a very negative eschatology where everything is going horribly wrong and we're all about to die, etc.

It was a hang on, hang on. There is beauty, there is justice, there is love, there is life, there is love. Yes there is, but let's have the full picture of both, please.

I get the sense, I'm trying to cast my mind back to reading the book, but part of the question is this idea that actually, well, evil and suffering is kind of part and parcel of what this world is, and so don't expect it to suddenly all be made better as though we can somehow live in a world without any of that. Yes, yes, no I get that. And of course that's part of the ancient philosophy called Stoicism.

It's also part of what people like Leibniz said in the 17th century, that this is the best of all possible worlds, so get used to it. And various of the Enlightenment philosophers look back at that and say, it's really the best. And Voltaire's complaint is really the best of all possible worlds, and Voltaire quoted the Lisbon earthquake.

So this is the sort of thing that happens in the best of all possible worlds, just on the day when everyone goes to church, there's a massive earthquake and they all get crushed by falling buildings. What's that about? And so this discussion is a secular analogue of the Christian debates about providence and the way that God runs the world. And that's always been quite a big question for Christian theologians, that if God is the creator, then why is the world like this? And to draw back and say, well it's all part of a bigger pattern.

If that was so, why did Jesus weep at the tomb of Lazarus? You know, you've got to have a worldview which has room for the tears of Jesus at the grave of his friend, even though Jesus knows that he's prayed for him and he's going to raise him from the dead. And the rich density of that double experience in the Gospels, I think has got to be a feature. And that's painful to hold onto.

We would like to be able to say, oh well it'll all work out, it'll all pan out, but actually that's trivialising. I wouldn't dare say that to somebody who was just recently bereaved or whatever. We will get to animals in heaven, but the one thing that I wanted to ask, and other people have asked in regard to this way of seeing the new creation, and the fact that at one level we are working towards that.

We're being part of God's new creation plan in the way we do our work, do our ask, you know, we're wanting to bring that future into the presence if you like. But to what extent is it dependent on us, and to what extent is it dependent on God who will ultimately

bring everything together? I mean, I've even heard some people sort of take your theology and take it a bit further and say, well actually whatever the new creation is, will be the ones creating it. It'll be some kind of where we finally get the technology right and we can all live in a kind of abundant world.

And it doesn't involve any supernatural intervention in sense, it's all from our own efforts. Again, this is the trouble that we divide things into natural or supernatural, which is again, sorry to be sound like a crack grammar from record, this is an 18th century fancy that you've got natural and supernatural and never the train shall meet. In the Middle Ages, the word supernatural always meant things which are meshing with the natural world, but in which God seems to be doing something more and greater than he normally does, but it's not either or it's both working together.

And there's been all sorts of mistakes and muddles when you pull those apart. So I want to say, even if it was true that when God finally does his new creation, it'll be us who are doing it, that would be because God by his spirit is at work in and through us. Part of the problem here is that we've not really been trinitarian in our thinking.

So many of these debates go back to the 18th and 19th century when theology was really all about who is God the Creator, who is God the Father, and then maybe you bring in Jesus if you can, and maybe if you're lucky you bring in the Spirit as well, we've got to be more robustly trinitarian and say, God does what God wants to do, and quite a lot of what God wants to do in the world and for the world, he wants to do through wise obedient human beings. How do wise obedient human beings get to be wise obedient human beings through the work of the Spirit based on the death and resurrection of Christ, so that ultimately it shouldn't be an either or. Paul says, I worked harder than all of them, but it wasn't me, it was the grace of God that was with me.

We have to go on saying both of those things. And it strikes me that whatever that new creation will look like, I mean, in a sense God proactively bringing people back into this new creation to be part of it in some physical sense inevitably requires something that I'm guessing is going to go beyond our human ingenuity. Of course, of course.

But of course, just like Easter itself is a shock, but I mean, there is a sense that you need to go back to the road to Emmaus and the two who are so sad and these women have told us they've seen a vision of angels who say is alive, but if we're not, we're not going to be able to do that. And angels who say is alive, but of course you don't believe that stuff. Jesus says how foolish you are.

You just haven't read the text and tells them a story again and it's a, of course. And I think in the new day when it dawns, there will be that both and there will be, oh, dear, it's all gone horribly wrong and then suddenly, oh my goodness, if only we'd had our eyes opened all along. Let's finally get to do all dogs go to heaven, the classic question, but it's a serious one.

Yeah, yeah. As I said at the beginning, people, you know, for many people, their animals, their pets are like parts of the family. Of course, they are.

I've got a couple of people asking similar questions. Caden says, what do you think about animals in heaven? Will pets and wildlife be recognizable on the new earth? Yes. Or will God create them in you? What does the Bible say about this? And William in Seattle brings it down to earth with, I have an 11 year old, very tender-hearted little girl whose dog recently died.

Her good friend told her that animals don't have souls, so she would not see her dog again in heaven. She asked me if that was true and I don't know what to tell her. While this is not one of those deep theological questions you tend to tackle, an answer to give my grieving daughter would be greatly appreciated.

Yeah, the Bible says, as far as I'm aware, absolutely nothing about this particular question, partly because this is asked in a very modern framework, and particularly the question of whether dogs have souls. I mean, the idea of the soul is a platonic idea which you don't find in the New Testament in that form. So from that point, if you we don't have souls in that sense, when the Bible talks about soul as applied to us, the word "suke" - soul in Greek - refers to the Hebrew word nephesh, which is more like what we would mean by a person.

Or a personality, the real me. So I think I want to say something like this, that when a human being loves and cares for an animal, and when that animal responds to that love and care, there is a bond between them, which is part of who that human being is, just as when somebody loves God, there is a bond between them and God, which we call the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit looks after that person until the resurrection, and I don't see any reason at all, while looking after that person shouldn't include incorporating by a kind of overflow of grace, looking after of the animals, birds, whatever, that that person has loved and brought joy to in this life.

So you could start the question from the other end and say, "If God the Creator made a world which included giraffes and whales and grasshoppers and all these crazy things fancy making a world with all these weird and wonderful creatures, is it likely that the new creation would be sort of boring and flat and wouldn't have creatures like that in it?" It seems to me far more likely that there will be an abundance of all sorts of creatures being gloriously themselves and sharing in all kinds of relationships with God's human creatures, and that in the middle of that, there will be a little girl, or perhaps an older woman by then, who will recognize among the plethora of delighted creatures, a dog to whom she gave love and companionship, and who returned that favor. I don't see why that shouldn't be so. Well, I hope that's given some comfort and may do to your 11-year-old daughter, William.

These are big questions. In a sense, we engage our imagination as we begin to peer into

the fog of what that new creation might be, but it's been really fun to do it with you today, Tom. Thank you very much.

Thank you. And thanks again for all of your questions. Again, you'll hear the ways to get in touch with the show if you want to ask more of your own on future editions of the program, but we'll see you again next time.

Thank you. Thanks for being with us on today's edition of the show. Do come back next time for questions on the Apostle Paul, which, of course, is a strength of Tom's particularly.

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