

OpenTheo

#105 The theology of death

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom and Justin engage listener's theological questions about death - lamenting death, Paul's view of death as an 'enemy', and whether physical death is a result of the fall.

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Transcript

[Music] The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

[Music] Hello and welcome back to the show that brings you the thought and theology of New Testament scholar, NT Wright, and brought you in partnership with NT Wright Online, SBCK and Premier Unbelievable. I'm Justin Briley, Head of Theology and Apologetics there and today we're looking at the theology of death.

It may seem like a rather somber subject, but lots of you want to know about it. Questions like how does John's gospel deal with death? What's Paul's understanding of death as an enemy or a mercy from God? And that whole question of physical death is it a result in some way of sin and the fall? We're getting to all of those questions this week. Thanks to someone in Switzerland who left a podcast review to say, "As a Jesus follower and theology student, I absolutely love the podcast.

And if you're able to rate and review us in your podcast provider, it'll help other people to discover the show as well." Just before we get into today's program, some exciting unbelievable live events coming up soon. Ask Philip Yancey Anything, that's on the 1st of

March, you can register free to be part of the audience for this live Q&A webinar. I'll be interviewing him about his role in being an incredibly significant voice in the evangelical church over the past few decades.

He's had a wonderful autobiography out recently called "Where the Light Fell". You can be part of that and we're about to open ticketing for unbelievable the conference 2022, Saturday the 14th of May, live from the British Library in London. But you can attend from anywhere in the world and thousands of people came online for our conference last year with Tom.

Exciting theme this time, "God Unmuted", helping the church to find its authentic voice again. So for both of those events, go to unbelievable.live. There's a link with today's show. For now, into your questions.

Welcome back to another edition of the show. And frequently, the questions that get asked cover all kinds of issues around theology, Tom. But perhaps death and dying are among the most obvious that come up time and again.

Obviously because it's part of everybody's experience in some way or another. And people, I think, have a real concern over what happens when we die specifically. And especially some of the more, if you like, practical aspects of what it means to be resurrected in the new creation and so on.

We'll come to some of the practical questions on next week's show. People have got some practical questions around things like cremation and burial and that sort of thing. But first of all, some questions if you like that deal more with a theological sort of side of this.

And I'll leap right in with Brett from Sterling Heights in Michigan, who says, "Really appreciate the show and have benefited from the wisdom. As a pastor and an emergency centre chaplain, I've been working alongside grief a lot in recent years. I'm working on a doctoral project which I'm framing as a Johannine fanatology." You'll have to explain what that means in a moment, Tom.

"A Johannine fanatology looking particularly at the Johannine voice into a theology of death." So what are some ways Christians can approach death from a place that honours God while being honest in lament? So my first question is, what is a Johannine fanatology for those who you don't know, Tom? Well, yes indeed, the fanatology, it's not a word that happy people use a lot, it's fair to say. But the Greek word "thanatos" is the word for death. So a fanatology would be a theology of death or a theory of death.

I'm not sure, myself until I saw this question, I hadn't actually thought of doing a particular Johannine take on death as opposed to a ball line or a marker or something take. But I think I understand something of the question, though I very much honour

what Brett is doing. I have not worked alongside grief that much.

As a pastor, naturally, I have had to meet with and pray with people who are grieving, facing death, whether they're own or that of one they love. But that hasn't been as big a part of my experience as it obviously is for Brett. For me, faced with the question, John's Gospel, death, question mark, I go straight to John chapter 11, which has Jesus, who John has made quite clear to us, is the incarnate Word of God.

He is the one through whom the worlds were made. He is the one through whom all life and light came into being. And this Jesus, this incarnate Jesus, weeps at the tomb of his friend.

Now, once you've said that, you've said everything really. And there were some people in the early church who were so overawed by this that they said, "Well, he wept and suffered and died as a human, but he did miracles and so on, including raising Lazarus, insofar as he was God." John won't allow us to do that. The fact of Jesus weeping means that God himself, God incarnate, is weeping at the tomb of his friend.

Now, it seems to me, therefore, it is perfectly honouring to God, to lament, and indeed, not to lament, is not to honour God. I have met some people, some devout Christians, who, because they have a very strong belief in the Christian hope of the ultimate life everlasting, they have somehow fooled themselves into thinking that it's wrong to grieve over the death of someone that you love. And I know one good lady who didn't weep or grieve at all at the funeral of her own husband, to whom she'd been married for well over 40 years.

It was only two or three years later when other family events went in the way that she hadn't expected, that she suddenly came out with overwhelming grief, and it was quite clear that this was the delayed grief that she should have been able to express for her husband. Because not to grieve is to deny love, because grief is the shadow side of love, and not to lament over someone's death is to fail to honour God, who is the creator and love. And that is the creator and life giver, that life is God's good gift, and even though we as Christians believe in the hope, well, Jesus knew what he was going to do, he was going to raise Lazarus.

So he didn't stroll in and say, well, that's all right, okay, this is a bit of fun, isn't it? Let's just get on with the job. Jesus weeps because something about Lazarus is death, is shocking, it's horrible, it's the denial of the goodness of God in this particular person. And then we believe God is going to deal with that, but the other side of suffering, of pain, of waiting, of grieving, of crying, etc.

So it seems to me that lament and the honouring of God in creation are actually two sides of the same coin here. I mean, I sometimes get that sense that some Christians do feel that there's been this trend, for instance, recently, for funerals, people say, well,

don't come dressed in black or anything, coming bright colours, this is going to be a celebration of the person's life. And while I totally acknowledge that, and that may be the right thing for certain situations, at the same time we shouldn't try and ignore the fact that something very sad has happened, and that's okay to recognise that, isn't it? Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

And I have been on the edge of that cultural question as well, and also some people have gone to the point of saying, we'll do the cremation first, and then we'll go into church and we'll have a service of Thanksgiving. And I think that's, sometimes people are afraid of their own grief, afraid of perhaps this huge volcano of violent sorrow which could come. And I want to say, actually, church is the right place for that.

You know, crematorium are horrible places, we'll come to that another question, because they're only concerned with death, whereas the church is the place of joy and sorrow, and I think to come into the church with a coffin and to be able to have that both celebration and grieving, and then to dispose appropriately of the body, we'll come back to that later, as I say, that's a much healthier way to do it. Yes, I mean, it brings me back, again, treading on territory of next week's podcast, to a very, you know, the most memorable funeral I've ever been at was a young lady from our church, who died well before her time very sadly, young South African lady and her widow is now, you know, still a member of our church, but it was both a place where many tears were shared, because she was only, you know, in her early 30s. But there was also this joyful sort of aspect to it as well, and it's a strange mixture, church of the joy and the sorrow, sort of all mixed together in a service like that.

Yes, yes, I think, but I do think that contemporary Christians of various sorts are not terribly good at getting this balance right, and we need to work at it. Hall's understanding of death is what Ross in Canada wants to ask about. How did Paul think about this? Genesis 3, verse 22, seems to imply that God makes a choice to mercifully allow the death of humanity, to sort of prevent us from living forever in a fallen state.

That's the way Ross reads it anyway. He says, "Making time for the plan of redemption to rescue us." But at the same time, Paul refers to death as an enemy that will one day be defeated. So how are we to think of death then? Is it a problem, or a gift, or both, or neither would love to hear your thoughts? Yes.

Let's start with that Pauline passage, which is 1 Corinthians 15 verses 20 to 28, one of the all-time great Pauline passages, which we ought to have engraved on our hearts, which include the overthrow of every enemy against God and God's kingdom. And he says, "The last enemy to be destroyed is death." And that goes, of course, very closely with what the book of Revelation says, that death and Hades themselves are thrown into the lake of fire. You think, how does that work? This is the death of death.

What exactly does that mean? And it's there that I think we're on the brink of a mystery,

which I'm not sure we have good language for. But the point is this, when God made the world, it was good. It was very good.

God said so again and again in Genesis 1. God saw it all, and it was good, and then he created human beings, and he said it was very good. So anything that denies, distorts, destroys that is a slap in the face for God the good creator. It's like somebody taking a beautiful violin and just snapping it into.

And you imagine the violin maker, let alone a violin player, saying, "How could you do that?" And that's what death does. It takes something which is inherently beautiful and lovely, and just says, "No, this is finished." Well, it's going to throw it away. And if we don't react to that with some sort of horror, then I think we're not tuning into the reality of the situation.

Now, having said that, of course, and there are ancient myths about this as well, that somebody who is given the chance of living forever and ever and ever and says, "Oh, yes, I want that." And then discovers that as they live forever and ever and ever, they go on getting older and all their hang-ups and all their angers and all their anxieties are still there. Do they have to suffer that forever and ever? And this is a way of saying, look, granted the sort of people that we now are, there is a sort of kindness in saying enough of that, it's time now to go to sleep. You know, you've been the person you've been, you've had your shot at this human life thing.

Because we are none of us in such a state that we could just step straight into carrying on forever and ever, as though there was nothing wrong with us. And this is actually part of the answer to those at the moment who are saying, "Let's find out what it is that causes death and let's deal with that." I debated this with Peter Thiel, the PayPal billionaire, who is one of his pet schemes to find the cause of death and deal with it. I remember saying, would it actually be a good thing if you or I were to live to be 200 or 300 or 400? What are we actually talking about there? So I think there is a moment, I visited somebody the other day who's very sick and very near death, and I'm not sure that he really knew who I was, but we knew each other well a long time ago.

And when I look at somebody in that physical condition, I understand that that prayer of St. Francis is a verse in that here, more creatures of our God and King. A verse we don't often sing, which goes, "And thou most dear and kindly death, waiting to hush our latest breath, alla lua." In other words, this is actually for somebody in this condition, it's a kindness. That's something we might allow ourselves to say sometimes when we're looking at somebody who is decrepit, physically, emotionally, mentally, et cetera, that death is a mercy, as we sometimes say.

But that's the extra bit which we can say, but the primary thing to say is that death is the denial of something that's good. And that's why the resurrection is so important because it's a way of saying, God is going to bring this person into a new bodily life in his

new creation. And let's not make death such a great thing that we forget that ultimate promise.

Well, there's a very much related couple of questions that have come in, both from Tom in London and Matthew in Winona and Lake, Indiana, in fact, Grace College in Seminary, says Matthew. Let's ask them both. Tom's first is a short one.

It says, "If Genesis 1 to 2 is not about a literal six-day creation, in what sense did death enter the world when Adam sinned, such as in Romans 5, wouldn't it have already been very much a feature of pre-Adam creation?" And then, question two sort of expands on that from Matthew. It says, "Apologies in advance for the length of this question. I'm studying theology at Seminary, and it seems the more I learn, the more I realise I don't fully understand, which is admittedly helping my humility a bit.

I hate to passage the other day, and I can't forget it's out. Romans 5 verses 12 to 14, which Matthew quotes here, "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man and death through sin, in this way death spread to all people because all sinned. In fact, sin was in the world before the law, but sin is not charged to a person's account when there is no law.

Nevertheless, death reigned from Adam to Moses. Even over those who did not sin in the likeness of Adam's transgression, he is a type of the coming one." And then, I'm not going to try and pronounce this Greek word, but it says, "I'm struggling with this particular word. You can go ahead, Tom." Elogito.

Elogito, rendered as "charged to one's account." The only other currents I've seen is in Philemon regarding the guilt of anesimous being charged to St Paul's account. So I have to wonder, is Paul saying that those who had not received the law were not charged for breaking it? Obviously, death still reigned, but even though they died, since mankind can't exist eternally in sinfulness, maybe they were exempted from some of the laws charged? I haven't sorted this out. I would appreciate any help you can give.

Well, they are two different sorts of questions, really, coming from similar sources here. But they are very closely related. And I'm kind of amused to be faced with Romans 5, 12, 14 in a podcast situation because if I was teaching a class on Romans, you could easily spend a whole hour on just those 12, 13, 14.

And of course, I and others have written commentaries on Romans, and I'm sure that Grace College and Seminary where Matthew was studying will have dozens of commentaries on Romans on the shelves, and I would urge him to go and look at those. The crucial thing there, and then I'll come back to Tom from London afterwards, the crucial thing there is that Paul is very much aware that the law of Moses is given to Israel. We in the West have tended to think of the law as the moral law to which all humans are subject, but throughout Romans' angulations, when Paul is talking about the

law, he's talking about the Mosaic law.

So he's talking about Gentiles and Jews. So he's talking about Gentiles who are sinning without having the law. This echoes what he'd already said in Romans 2, and indeed, Romans is so tightly stitched together that at every point you can refer backwards and forwards.

Which you need to do if you're going to understand the whole thing. So that Gentiles, he is saying, are simply sinning. They don't have the law.

They're blundering around in the dark, getting stuff wrong, but it's not as if it were counted up, reckoned, because they don't have Torah to do that. But then, as he says in Romans 3, 19, following the Jews who do have the law, the law says to them specifically, you have broken it. And that's what Deuteronomy 26 to 29 are all about, that Moses says, God has given you this law, but I know that in fact you're going to go ahead and break it.

And Deuteronomy 32, Moses says that really very strongly, and Paul is picking up on that throughout. So there's a Jew Gentile thing going on in Romans 5, 12 to 14. And from that point of view, yes, death reigned, but humankind, as you say, can't exist eternally in sinfulness, but it's not because they were exempted from some of the law's charges.

It's that as Gentiles, they simply weren't under the law. And that's one of the big shifts which we have to make to understand what Paul is saying. So with that, I think I'll refer Matthew to my commentary and many others and go back to Tom from London.

I have taken the view, and I think I say this in one of the essays in my book, *Surprised by Scripture*, when I'm talking about historical Adam and all that, that, yes, Genesis 1 to 2 is clearly not about a literal six-day creation. That's a modern mistake to imagine that. But I think we have to distinguish between ordinary death in terms of a life cycle, the trees drop their leaves and the leaves turn into mulch and fuel the next generation of vegetation, et cetera.

And then what I might call death with a capital D, that God created humans to be his image bearers, and he gave them a garden which had the tree of life. Now, the trees in the garden are very, very mysterious in Genesis 2. I don't claim to understand them fully, the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the tree of life. But the aim was for humans to be able to escape what was happening to the rest of creation in this life cycle which had been going on for millennia.

But in the day that they decide to grab at the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, then death with a capital D will overtake them. And we know that when they're put out of the garden, there's an angel with a flaming sword to guard the way to the tree of life precisely so that they don't then take it and live forever, as we were saying before. So it seems to me we have to distinguish what you might call ordinary death, which is simply

part of the life cycle, and death which is this horrible thing which is denial of what the humans were meant to be and do.

I've heard some people, I have a feeling, I don't think I misrepresented him, say Dennis Alexander who's quite a well-known geneticist in Cambridge in Christian. And very much a proponent of theistic evolution. When he addressed this in his book *Creation or Evolution Do We Have To Choose*, he sort of essentially said the Romans passage and what it says about death is in his view talking more about a spiritual death rather than physical death being introduced.

And I don't know if you would make that sort of a distinction, this capital D death. Yes, I would be a little wary of using the words physical and spiritual to make that distinction. It's as though there's an intensification of the meaning of this physical death.

It will be physical death, but it will have now the sense of a denial of what humans were really made for. There are many other mysteries going on in Genesis 2 and 3 at that point, and I'm not claiming that I've impacted that. I encourage anyone who wants more to go back to some of our podcasts where we've dealt in more detail, I should say, more detail with some of these issues around Creation, Evolution, Adam and so on.

They're in the back catalogue if you want to explore them. Well, we'll continue talking about what is obviously a sort of somber subject to death or next week's podcast. We're going to look at some of your practical questions around it next time.

But for now, thank you very much for having us to think through the issues we've looked at today, Tom. Thank you. Well, thanks as ever for being with us, and as I've mentioned, we'll be continuing this conversation on death, but from a more practical angle next time.

Questions like "When We Die", "Are We A Sleep" or "Are We With Jesus" in some way? Questions around "Crammation" versus "Bereal". You'll find out what Tom would prefer for himself of those two options. And what about "Organ donation"? All interesting questions on next week's show.

You can get more from the show at AskNTRight.com. Register there, and you'll also get the link to ask a question for yourself too. And just a reminder, before we finish today's show, *Unbelievable.Live* is the place to register for our upcoming live webinar with Philip Yancey on the 1st of March. You can ask him anything there, and it's free to attend.

You just need to register in advance. And also our ticketing for *Unbelievable The Conference* in May has gone live. It's going to be fab.

Unbelievable.Live. Again, the links are with today's show, and we'll see you next time.

[Music] [Silence]

