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#129 Would God need to redeem aliens? Life beyond earth and the cosmos

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

If the Universe is so big why did God choose to come to a small hill called Mount Zion? If there is sentient life beyond earth would it need redeeming too? Are the Nephilim evidence of aliens and UFOs? Tom answers questions on aliens and the cosmos!

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Transcript

Welcome back I'm Justin Briley and this is the show where I get to sit down with one of the world's leading theologians Tom Wright to ask your questions, brought to you in partnership with SBCK and NT Wright online and the show comes to you from Premier Unbelievable and you can find lots more of our resources and shows at our website premierunbelievable.com it's linked with the notes from today's show. Now today we're asking would God need to redeem aliens and questions about life beyond earth and the cosmos. If the universe is so big why did God choose to come to a small hill called Mount Zion? If there is sentient life beyond earth would it need redeeming too? And are the Nephilim evidence of aliens and UFOs? Tom's answering all kinds of interesting questions today.

By the way thanks for your feedback we received when you leave comments and reviews and Bethany responded to a show we did a little while ago that touched on addictions such as pornography addiction saying hey Justin I'm a big fan of the Ask N T right anything podcast many thanks for all your hard work on it. It's really helped me in a lot of my theological thinking. I just had a small piece of feedback about that episode which was great by the way.

Using the discussion on addiction you refer to the fact that many men in particular struggle with pornography. Whilst this is absolutely true it can be pretty alienating for the many women who also struggle with this problem to repeatedly hear it represented as a predominantly male issue. I really don't think that it is a male issue anymore and it only leads to feelings of shame for women making it less likely for them to speak about it.

It's something that me and several of my friends have all found difficult over the years. Anyway I hope you know that I'm only telling you this out of love and not out of anger just trying to balance the scales a bit more when it comes to conversations. Thank you very much yes totally get that not just a male issue by any means and thank you very much for getting in touch and if you want to get in touch maybe to leave a comment to ask a question of Tom you can register to do that at premierunbelievable.com or indeed you can rate and review us on your podcast provider it helps others to discover the show as well.

For now let's get into today's set of questions. Welcome back to another edition of the show and we're talking about aliens the cosmos. What if there was life on other planets? I don't know whether you're a fan of sci-fi at all Tom do you do you watch any sci-fi shows or read any of that sort of literature? No I'm afraid I've never been into sci-fi.

I don't know why I had friends when I was at school who were sci-fi readers I maybe tried bits here and there just didn't appeal to me. My life had been very full of other things and I've just never gone that route. Well either way we've certainly got some questions that involve aliens and the cosmos and that sort of thing so yeah it's interesting I often sometimes meet people who seem to think that because the Bible doesn't specifically talk about this that therefore it's missing sort of something and it'd be interested to know sort of to what extent you think the Bible does or doesn't comment on the concept of life on other planets or elsewhere.

But let's start at least with the questions here. The first one is from I think a father Sarah Finn in Boston in the USA who says knowing what we know about the size and complexity of the cosmos how do we get our heads wrapped around the claim that to quote the creator of the entire universe has chosen to live uniquely on a small ridge called Mount Zion near the eastern edge of the Judean hill country and you may even be quoting from you there Tom so do you want to comment on that? That is a quotation yes

it's a quotation from one of my books and that's something I was struck by enormously when I first lived in Jerusalem which was back in 1989 and saying the Psalms day by day I was saying that St. George's Cathedral and taking part in their morning and evening prayer you realize that the Psalms are saying this kind of thing. I have chosen Zion for myself this is my habitation forever and when you say that in England or America or somewhere it doesn't strike you quite as forcibly as when you're in Jerusalem and you know you're talking about that little hill just down the road.

So that sums up in a nutshell the same thing that Solomon says in his prayer in 1 Kings 8 which is heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you how much less this house that I've built nevertheless you have chosen to put your name here so that when we pray towards this house then you will hear in heaven your dwelling place and when you hear you will forgive and so it's woven into biblical theology that God is vastly greater than anything we can imagine and yet has chosen to do this very specific thing and that is part of the mystery of what theologians sometimes call election that in order to accomplish his purposes God chooses this people Abraham's family and then he chooses Isaac not Ishmael and Jacob not Esau and then after the exile it's a remnant etc and out of this remnant there is this one human being called Jesus of Nazareth and in him God says this is my beloved son in whom I'm well pleased and then he does what has to be done to rescue and restore God's world through his death and resurrection and that narrowing down of focus tells me something else about the way God the Creator may have worked in vast areas than we can imagine that we don't know if there's anything that we could call life on other planets or in other parts of our ever expanding cosmos as it now seems so even within our own galaxy we don't know if there's anything else out there that we could call life but there might be and then the question is so what and again this is not something I have researched in any detail it's not something that a biblical theologian is likely to trip over in one's ordinary reading but there are people like my friend and former colleague David Wilkinson in Durham who have written extensively about this David has one or two books where he deals with the question of of supposing their were life elsewhere what would that do and I don't see it I don't see it as a problem I see it as a curiosity that because of what I believe about God as the good creator of all that is in heaven and on earth and under the earth and if there are other life forms elsewhere then just as there are myriad life forms on this planet we've done our best to exterminate some of them alas but there are many many life forms and I believe God the Creator cares about all of them so it's not a big deal for me to suppose that he might have created other quite different life forms in other parts of the world and that he cares about them too how that relates to the specific events concerning Jesus are not totally different from the question of how the specific events concerning Jesus relate to the frogs in the pond or the birds in the tree or whatever there may be an interconnectedness I think contemporary scientific investigation suggests that there is more interconnectedness between different life forms than we have usually imagined and that that might well spill out if you like into the vasta extensors of the cosmos but

beyond that I'm not sure that anyone can go and certainly I am not qualified to comment much more well we are going to you know continue to press you on some of these issues Tom let's let's talk about aliens and yes the question of whether they might need themselves redeeming if they were to exist a couple of questions here Dennis in Oregon and Matt in Wheaton Illinois Dennis asks in light of the vastness of the universe and the possibility of other life-sustaining planets in a galaxy far far away what is the possibility of their being either in our past present or future other beings created in the image of God and if such beings exist would they exhibit the same sin nature as us would they fall and would the son of God visit them as their version of Emmanuel in order to save and redeem them and Matt in Wheaton Illinois similar ish question who says my question is to do with aliens crazies it may sound whilst I've shrugged it off in the past it's a topic I've wrestled with for a while now I know C.S. Lewis addressed this topic in a sense in his space trilogy my question is if there are other sentient beings in the universe how would that impact our view of God what if they were fallen creatures would our view change if they sought humanities demise so there's a few questions in there but let's sort of go to the central one which is again sort of as one of these people mentioned raised in that that sort of space trilogy by Lewis especially in his book "Paralyndra" where he envisages you know life on other planets other sentient beings needing their own messiah their own saviour and so on what what yeah what what's your thoughts Tom would firstly on the idea of life on other planets but also you know this idea that it would also befall potentially be fallen yes yes I I'm always amused when people use the word aliens because until very recently and it may still be the case if you fly to America and if you're British then when you come to passport control you have a choice between U.S. passports and aliens and I've often thought you know okay I'm an alien according to this but I don't have the green ears or whatever so the word aliens covers many things of course it's just an old Latin word meaning difference different things different people but we've used the word in different senses is what I'm saying and obviously here it refers to creatures sentient beings is a way of putting it what counts as sentient some people would say that the the trees and the flowers are sentient beings and of course until comparatively recently in the history of the human race until maybe 600 years ago most humans in Europe and Africa were aware of other humans in Europe and Africa and in further out in Asia but were completely unaware of the whole world that we think of as the Americas and that when they found America or when which is of course a particular odd way of putting it America was always there when they stumbled upon it then they had serious questions do the people who live here have souls are they real human beings do they need saving the same way that we do so in a sense what's happening now is we're asking the same questions that people in the not too distant past asked about people that we would now recognize as other human beings even though they had very different customs cultures etc and of course within the planet as we now see it there was all there were all sorts of interconnections and the pre history of the different ethnic tribal groups etc can be now traced by archaeology and so on whereas we would find it very difficult I imagine to do anything similar supposing other sentient beings were

to be found not just on Venus or Mars but on in places far further out in the larger outer space so yes C.S. Lewis does explore this and Perelandra he has a scene which is really rather like what Genesis 3 might have looked like if Eve had eventually said no and it's a wonderful temptation scene which then goes the other way but but yeah Lewis is asking those questions really as a way of addressing some of the what if questions which then bounce back on us how do we understand our own place in the great scheme of things I I remember when I was a teenager there was a song which people which was quite popular among the sort of newer Christian music in the 60s and 70s which was about supposing there were other stars and planets which had other creatures will there have to be multiple incarnations will the Son of God have to die in each one of those in order to redeem them and I remember at the time being a bit puzzled about that and thinking actually if what the churches always said about Jesus is true then Jesus is the embodiment not of a local deity who belongs to this planet only but of the God who made heaven and earth and the whole thing and that just as it's very specific and very odd in a way seen from the perspective of 18th century universal enlightenment philosophy very odd to say that God came as a Jewish man in one part of the world at one moment in history so it would only be the same oddity magnified a bit but basically the same to say that whatever has happened in the entire cosmos this Jesus and his death and resurrection is the very center of everything now people would say oh that's so so parochial so almost selfish to think like that but it is pretty much what Colossians 1 says he is the image of the invisible God the first born of all creation in him all things were created in heaven and earth etc etc etc and then and he is the the start of it all first born from realms of the dead so did everything he might be preeminent if you read Colossians 1 15 through 20 and carefully and prayerfully thinking about these issues I think you would probably conclude that if there are other sentient beings then the Jesus that we happen to know by a series of providential accidents etc is still the redeemer for them as well just as Jesus was the redeemer for the many races and nations and ethnic groups who western Europeans knew nothing of in say the 13th century but when they when they became aware that there were such people then it became clear that Jesus was the redeemer for them as well and that Jesus had had ways of making that known to them in advance of colonializing missionaries and so on that's where the real mystery would come in what way is the creator God already in touch with them as it were and just as with other species within our world whether the birds and the animals and the trees and the flowers and so on do we have to assume that whatever happens to them happens through us or do we not assume that they have their own ways of praising God and of being obedient to God of which we know very little or nothing so there are there are all sorts of mysteries there but we have to be quite careful because it is all speculation and we should not let speculation then outrun our caution and particularly we should not get so fixed on it that we then ignore the things the tasks which are immediate and close at hand yes and I think that I found that very helpful actually that the sense that if it is true that Christ's death and resurrection as it were is about this prefiguring of this new creation and so on then then that that is something that applies

to the whole cosmos in a sense just as you know just reading from Colossians 1 verse exactly here you know through through him to reconcile to himself all things and John 1 verse 18 as well yeah so so so yeah there's that sort of cosmic sort of significance even if it starts local it seems to you know span out across the whole cosmos in that way let's talk finally about aliens and Nephilim this is rather interesting question from Lenny in Florida who asks since you've already touched on a huge variety of topics I thought I'd narrow it down to two fringe topics although for some Christians they aren't very fringe at all firstly what is your take on the Nephilim and the idea that they might return before the second coming of Christ and connected to that secondly what do you think about aliens and what would be a sound Christian response to the idea of life on other planets well you've already obviously addressed number two but obviously there's a connection here in in Lenny's mind between this this race this you know rather mysterious references in the Old Testament to the the Nephilim and some people have made claims that perhaps this was some sort of you know UFO/Alien race that you know that and so on and any thoughts on this firstly you might want to just sketch out what you you understand of this these references to the to the Nephilim in the Old Testament Tom I don't have very much to say about the Nephilim and I confess though I didn't see this question yesterday or the day before I didn't at once go off to a Bible dictionary to check on my my facts about the Nephilim but I I don't think that scripture gives us any indication that we ought to be particularly bothered about the former races of either quasi-Hominids or giants or whatever who seem to have been around on the planet way back when you know you find it when the children of Israel are in the desert and approaching the promised land and they send the spies into the land and oh my goodness they've got big people there they've got giants and then you have Goliath and Gath etc it looks as though there are some hominids who are apparently of of a different size a different type to the ones that most people are and they seem then to have died out the idea that they are part of a kind of a UFO colony this would go back to Genesis 6 to the idea about the sons of God who take up with the daughters of men and they produce this this race I do not know what Genesis 6 would mean in terms of our interpretations today obviously ancient Jewish interpreters had all sorts of theories about this as part of the origin of evil not just Genesis 3 but also Genesis Genesis 6 as being that's where things went horribly wrong but the New Testament really doesn't pick that up you don't find Jesus saying now remember what happened to those Nephilim or watch out because they may be back there's you know there's so many things to be focused on in the New Testament and that really isn't one of them and I would say if anyone finds themselves focused on that and worried about it then they ought to give themselves a further crash course in reading Matthew Mark Luke and John and concentrate on the things that are central rather than the things that are peripheral and particularly I know that there are some circles in which UFO sightings and all that are all the rage I'm always interested if I see something in the papers about somebody from NASA or something saying it looks as though there really are some some beings out there who are occasionally interacting with us fine okay but please don't hook that in to any form of

biblical eschatology please don't imagine that there's anything in Scripture which says that are well before the end or before the rapture or anything like that some of these creatures are going to reappear if God wants to do something extraordinary God will do something extraordinary but I didn't see anything in the New Testament anything in the teaching of Jesus to hook those things together and make a further kind of future conspiracy theory out of it. Yes we've got our work cut out just making sense of life on earth without having to turn to other planets as well but anyway well quite and making sense and making sense of the central issues of the gospel and whatever else we want to say this is not one of those. Well it's been fun to in any case have a think about these things Tom and imagine what what the possibilities might be out there and I hope it's been helpful to those who have been in touch but for now thank you very much for being with me on today's show.

Thank you. Well thank you for being part of the show today such interesting questions and next time we're asking do I need to tithe we'll be talking about church rules, covenants and leadership your questions on that and by the way if you want to support what we do here you can do that over at our website premierunbelievable.com for now I hope you're enjoying the summer and we'll see you next time.

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