

# OpenTheo

## #142 What did St Paul believe about justification, election and salvation?

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### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom Wright talks to Justin about his book Paul: A Biography and takes listener questions on 'justification', election and salvation and what three things he would ask Paul if he were alive today. From a show first broadcast in 2019.

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## Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast Hello welcome back, it's Justin Brierley and the show brought to you in partnership with NT Wright Online, SBCK and of course Premier Unbelievable. I'm head of theology and apologetics. Check out this show and many of our other podcast videos and resources at our website, [premierunbelievable.com](https://premierunbelievable.com). Well today Tom's talking to me about his book Paul, a biography and taking listen to questions on justification, election and salvation and what three things he would ask Paul if he were alive today.

This was a show first broadcast in January 2019. By the way thanks to Mary Terries in Ireland who says love, love this show, I wait excited for it to publish every week. People

should pay for this but to get an education from one of the leading theologians of our time for free, now that's amazing.

Thank you Mary Terries and if you want to help others discover the show if you can leave us a rating in a review like Mary Terries did then that really helps others to find it on your podcast provider. Also just a quick note to get yourself booked in for our upcoming Unbelievable live event with Sean McDowell. "Culture war questions on Tuesday the 15th of November.

We're talking about how to respond with grace and truth on issues like abortion, transgender, sexuality, pornography and more. It's a chance to ask your questions for this live online gathering. Always a helpful and fruitful time when we host these and Sean is a brilliant communicator and apologist.

You just need to register for it at [unbelievable.live](http://unbelievable.live). That's Tuesday the 15th of November. The link is with today's show. For now let's get into today's set of questions.

Well here we are again Tom meeting over coffee and croissants and orange juice and just having a good old chat. I am incredibly privileged to be able to record these with you, these podcasts where we look at a variety of themes. I have no shame in saying I am a quote unquote fanboy of yours.

That's the modern terminology. So you've been writing and researching Paul for decades now haven't you? Yes. I mean the last, well a couple of years ago I had you on when you wrote your magnum opus.

That's actually amazing. That's five years ago. That was that came out.

Yeah. It's gone to the two volumes sort of very academic. And is this really I suppose in a sense the popular level version of what you wrote then? Well sort of yes and no.

When I did that big book several people both including colleagues in the discipline said wish you'd do a shorter one. Of course part of the point of the longer one was that I've been writing shorter things and articles and people had always said yeah but you didn't explain this or yes but surely that has to be contextualized there. Okay you want the big thing? Here it is.

And then of course they all said it was far too long. So Jesus said you know we danced for you and you wouldn't sing and we wept and you wouldn't mourn. But this isn't exactly a potted down version because that was a book on Paul's mind and theology.

Now there's a lot of mind and theology in here but part of the whole point of it is that what Paul was thinking and saying was contextualized in a rich multi-layered life which was to do with both his Jewish upbringing and his amazing knowledge of the Jewish scriptures and with his contextualizing in the Roman world where he was a citizen and in

the Greek world where he knew his Epicureans from his Stoics and we see Paul navigating these things in a multi-layered way which I find just perpetually enthralling because I grew up with a Paul who was basically a brain box who said prayers as it were and then the rest of it was off on the side and the older I've got the more the whole man speaks to this whole man and that's been really exciting. You probably feel like you know his era almost as well as you know your own now. Well let's put it like this my students mock me because when I say the war I mean the Jewish Roman war of 66 to 17 not World War I or II and I say well yeah I sort of mentally live in the first thing though I've tried to diversify more recently and get back towards our day as well.

And just kind of give us a sense of how you structure this particular because you've called it Paul a biography and in that sense you are trying to write something that's sort of a narrative of his life it's very it's not a sort of academic book in the traditional sense. No no it's not at all I mean the only footnotes are basically references to bits of the Bible or bits of classical sources and so on so there's there's no discussion of other scholarly views or if I do say there are various views here I don't actually go into details who said it you can find those elsewhere. So this is going through from what we know about or can infer about his early life and how he got to the point where he was on the road to Damascus when dot dot dot and then what happened next and as with virtually all ancient history there are gaps and that's quite normal but when you have gaps in any narrative ancient or modern what you can do is probe cautiously from either side as it were the bits you do know and say well it's possible this it's likely that or it's almost certain that certain such and that's what I tried to do to construct something of a gift to us two thousand years later that he was obviously a prolific letter writer.

Well he comparatively prolific but actually the letters are short you know how many volumes do we have of Cicero's letters in the lab and they're fascinating and they shared a flood of light on all sorts of things in first century BC Roman culture but for Paul we've just got these snippets because he's writing on the go he's not leisure sitting there with all day to compose he's really he's really sending bulletins from the front as it were and so most of his time he isn't writing letters so far as we know he's he's talking with people he's preaching he's praying he's trying to organize these little communities and then from time to time he has to buzz off a letter to somebody. We kind of going to just sort of go with some of the questions obviously that have come in today and if people want the full story they can read Paul of biography or any of the other many books on Paul that you've written over the years. Let's start with the topic of justification because that's where a lot of people encounter what you are saying about Paul and what he had to say on that particular issue.

Keith in Chambersburg Pennsylvania says I've always wanted to know how anti-right would explain his understanding of justification to a local rural church congregation where people aren't as versed in the various schools of Pauline interpretation. Well this is a good opportunity I think just to perhaps unpack for show casual listener you know in

simple enough terms what you mean what you think Paul meant by justification and how that's commonly been in your view. Yes I it's slightly frustrating because this word simple.

I've written one or two books with the word simple or simply in the title and one of my publishers said to me once Tom I have to sit you down and explain the meaning of simply and I said listen if somebody comes to me in St Andrews where I work and says tell me how to get to Glasgow and keep it simple. I could say just keep heading western a bit south and you can't miss it but it might be kind to tell him that there's a big river which is several miles wide and that there's a mountain range and that there's this way round or that way round and you might get in a mess so forgive the complexity but sometimes it is actually necessary for the sake of getting you to where you need to go. I think if I were faced with that with a congregation that had never really thought it through what I'd like to do is to take them to Galatians chapter 2 and say let's just sit with Galatians 2 and maybe even do some role play as to what's going on in the church in Antioch because this is the first time that Paul talks about justification and we presume that this makes sense you know I want to bring in Romans and Philippians as well eventually but not yet and in Galatians what's going on is there's a crisis because Jews and Gentiles are sharing fellowship in the Messiah sharing table fellowship together as Christians with no distinction between them and then some people come from Jerusalem to say shouldn't be doing this Gentiles you're not supposed to be in the same at the same table as Jews and so please go away and or the Jews separate themselves and when Paul is talking about justification that is the presenting issue and our trouble with reading Galatians 2 is that because we have in our traditions justification is I'm a sinner I need to get to heaven so I need to be justified in order for that to happen we import that back into Galatians 2 and we forget what was actually going on and the point is that God in Christ has dealt with the sin problem not so that we can go to heaven but so that God by his spirit can live in our midst and so that we can be the family of God together because the reason Jews didn't eat with Gentiles is that they were regarded as unclean as automatically sinners because they were outside the law they were idolaters etc etc and the point of the gospel for Paul is that what has happened on the cross means that anyone who is in Christ has had their sin and evil and all that dealt with so that then there is no reason why Christian Jews shouldn't sit down so justification is God's declaration that all those who are in the Messiah are part of the same family and that their sins are forgiven and it's not in that sense a transactional thing as it was sometimes presented by the reformers and what that happens to me so this was an answer to the question how might you start it off with the finished congregation I would get them to wallow in Galatians 2 until they got the message and then they might want to go into Galatians 3 as well which is about the covenant with Abraham etc.

Sooner or later I would want to take them through Philippians 3 which is a similar thing but with Paul's autobiography being very central you know where I had all these Jewish

privileges but I abandoned them for the sake of the Messiah etc. Sooner or later I would want to get to Romans and in Romans and only in Romans justification is reframed within a law court setting. What has happened in the Christian tradition is that people have taken the law court setting from Romans have forgotten the covenantal and familial settings which were the original location in Galatians and constructed a whole extra thing based only on a law court setting and have then tried to work out how it works and particularly they've tried to do so out of Romans 1 to 4 without Romans 5 to 8 but actually the argument of Romans on justification is 1 to 8 with then coming through to 9 to 11 and the whole strand of what this means for God's worldwide purposes in and through Israel and then 12 to 16.

So it's more complicated if you start with the post-Luther questions then okay we can have great fun going through the 16th, 17th century through to the 21st different theories of how people get justified all with a law court with either imputed righteousness or imparted righteousness or whatever and I want to say I know what those questions are about they can be extremely helpful partially but they can also be extremely puzzling. I believe that the Bible itself is the place to start this is the great irony that Luther was saying the Bible the Bible the Bible but actually often his followers have forgotten well they they go to Luther and they go to subsequent diminishes. Luther was quite a many-sided rich character he said a lot of things about a lot of things and I don't think actually he would have radically disagreed with me about Galatians he might have done a bit but already in 1955 in one of the volumes of church dogmatics called Luther on his misreading of Galatians very interesting so there's all sorts of issues then but again it's comparatively simple if you start with the Bible and allow the Bible to tell you how you should use these words but the problem is when a word that is in our translations of the Bible cuts loose and it gets on a tradition of its own then when people start there they assume that what the Bible said means what we've made that word mean and again and again that ain't necessarily so.

This is sometimes called the new perspective on Paul though I'm sure you would say well it's the original perspective. A new perspective. A new perspective and Douglas in Gibraltar says in the light of your understanding of the new perspective on Paul and your reading of Romans how would you lead someone to faith in Christ now that's much bigger question I suppose but I suppose the question at the heart of it is something that was relatively simple maybe to present as a here's how to become a Christian and have your sins forgiven suddenly looks a little bit more complex or not quite as simple to explain in that.

Yes yes and obviously people have taken Romans chapters 1 to 4 and have referred to it as the Romans road and have said here you are you're a sinner Christ died for your sins so now dot dot you can go to heaven of course what they don't usually say is so now according to Romans 4 you're part of Abraham's family that's not that doesn't make it into the script exactly but when you find yourself telling a story which then doesn't

actually quite square with what's in the text you should beware so I would say sorry we need to complexify we have oversimplified and we have misread Romans and if the question is how do you lead somebody to Christ then again as I said before in answer to an earlier question on another podcast it depends entirely who they are where they're coming from what their background is how much they know already I would in all sorts of ways much rather walk with them through one of the gospels with Mark or John say and say let's just live with this and let's look at this person Jesus and let's ask the questions about what is this kingdom why did he die who is he etc if in the course of that issues come up about God's whole plan by all means let's read Romans but Romans is like you know Romans is like climbing the north wall of the i-gare it's a wonderful spectacular thing and the view from the top is unmatched but it's a tough climb and if you think it's actually going to be a simple Sunday afternoon stroll then you may slip around from time to time if it were to be boiled down into a phrase or something that you could give in simple terms are we are inviting people to become part of God's family in Christ essentially there's a sort of that's the invitation that we're giving when we that is the invitation and that is how great many people do become Christians because they realize this is a family and it's a loving generous outgoing cheerful family and they want to be part of it um but do you have to have as it were if you like sign on the dotted line of a number of things I believe Jesus died for me yes he died for my sins rose again this is so this is all the basic baptismal things and I have taken many baptisms and confirmations and I've explained to congregations that the reason we say the creed during that is that this is the badge we wear that when I confirm somebody and baptize somebody say we're not welcoming this person to the family because they're male or female or because of the color of their skin or because they're rich or poor or anything the only badge we wear is the badge of what we believe and that's justification by faith actually that that we are not defined by our background by our ethnicity by our previous moral background we are justified in Christ Paul says three times Romans three Philippians three Galatians two we are justified in the Messiah in other words when God looks at us he doesn't see us as we are he sees us in Christo in the Messiah and the Messiah has died therefore we have we've left all that behind and that takes a lifetime to work out what that then means but that is that is justification by faith let's open up another massive can of worms then it's staying in Romans I suppose a Devon in old Oxford Surrey says are we elected slash chosen by God is our salvation all by grace or do we have to make a choice or do we have to make a choice how how can that be grace all the classic questions I'm very confused says Devon how do you try and present this simply this is of course a classic theological problem that became very sharp edged at certain points in the Reformation though it actually goes back way behind that and Augustine and Aquinas and so on they believe very clearly that some people were chosen by God and some people seemed not to be part of the problem here is that the language of election is very much Israel language it's very goes back to Deuteronomy and to the call of Abraham and when the New Testament is retrieving that it's retrieving something which isn't primarily about how this person gets saved but the way in which

God is using this what we've called before the scandal of particularity to reach out into the world and that Jesus himself is the elect he is the chosen one and this sounds for a moment very like carbar that that we are chosen in him and Paul says that in Ephesians 3 we are chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world but Israel's election which is what that's modeled on was always for the sake of the world here's major parting of the ways here that there are some who will say God chose the Jewish people so that they would be his people and then he seems to have extended it but actually the point is in Genesis 12 and Genesis 15 Genesis 17 Genesis 20 the promises to Abraham are promises through Abraham for the world and you see that in the Psalms particularly where in Psalm 2 Psalm 72 etc the Messiah the coming king is the one through whom God's promise blessing to Abraham will extend to the ends of the earth and chosenness means chosen to carry this promise forward but that chosenness doesn't in that sense though mean God has pre-selected a select group of people who will believe in him and well that that is that is part of the mystery and when you get to Romans 8 28 29 30 there is a sense that Paul is saying something which sounds a bit like that but again Romans 8 is all about the true climax of the Israel story in the Messiah and the whole point is it's for the whole creation so if we are shaped according to the pattern of the Messiah the minute we think oh so we've been chosen so we're special so that's fine we've missed the point because it's so that we are the ones through whom the world will be redeemed now that I'm not universalist that doesn't mean everyone will be saved it means I don't think actually that passage Romans 8 28 to 30 is trying to answer the questions that Calvin and the others who followed him were addressing when we hear a word like predestination I think sure we often read into it of course of course and this get we trip over as well because there have been major philosophical debates about determinism and free will and the Christian debates about predestination or or free choice or whatever are a kind of a theological reflection of those philosophical debates and both of the ends of that feel wrong in that we know in our bones that we're not just automata at least we really really think that it's very hard to imagine that we are simply running on an automatic thing equally we don't want to be like random atomic particles whizzing around without rhyme or reason somewhere there is a balance and the philosophers struggle with it here's a picture I've sometimes been given by those who want to reconcile the language of predestination and human freedom and so on imagine a flight that's on its way from London to New York that flight is predestined it's scheduled to go there but it's a free choice of anyone who wants to book themselves into that flight as it were and there's this sense that all those who are in Christ as it were are on the flight but that doesn't mean that there isn't freedom to choose whether you are yes yes you could get away with that perhaps half with a sermon I wouldn't like to argue it in a theological seminar but but I think that the fact that we reach for illustrations like that is a way of saying that we know we shouldn't get skewered on the horns of this dilemma because yes Ephesians 2 by grace you are saved through faith it is not of yourselves it is the gift of God and very clear in Paul and in John and all over but at the same time if we think that that means okay nothing for me to do then we've misconstrued it go back to

Genesis 1 for goodness sake humans are made to be reflecting God's image that's a vocation it's not you're not just a passenger Lerman in Canada asks a professor right in your book Paul Abography you say that Paul is striking a blow at the very heart of the Eropagus's raison d'etre when he speaks of a judgment by a resurrected man but Paul leaves the democratic jurisprudence structure itself intact is it a problem for Christians with their strong sense of the Imago day for humanity that the Athenians were first to implement a democratic process that's quite a big and complex question it's a great question but the Athenians were and weren't democratic in our sense I mean of course half the Athenian society were slaves and half of the remaining of the free Athenian society were women and it was only Athenian male Athenian citizens who voted so from our point of view it's a really rather shrunk democracy and the Athenians may have invented it but they did funny things of it and it didn't last and the different things happened what I would want to stress is that for the early Christians like the Jews of the same period they looked around the world and they saw that many countries had different systems of monarchy and of or different whatever's they weren't terribly interested in how people came to power they were much more interested in what they did with power once they'd got it we in the modern western democracies we think for all sorts of interesting philosophical reasons going back to the 18th century and beyond we think that voting democratically gives people a mandate to do what they want for the next term in office because they've now been voted so they have the right to do it and then we have real difficulty holding them to account afterwards because the only way we have to hold them to account is not voting for them next time round now the Athenians as part of their democracy had the system of ostracism where if there was somebody that they really thought was a pain in the neck and we could name various people from British public life right now and possibly even American public life you could have a vote and you could actually banish somebody for a significant time from the city wouldn't that be nice well there are other people would wish the site but this was this was the Athenians knew that they had to have some checks and balances in that system and then the Romans often after a magistrate a consular or a consular whatever had their term in office when their term of office was over they would often be put on trial for mishandling of what they did now we don't usually do that either and maybe we should so so when we look at the ancient democracies we see that they knew they had to have some some checks we have abandoned that because of the 18th century ideology which I suspect may be partly behind this question which says that we don't believe in the divine right of kings so God is out of the political question so politics just makes itself like a sort of political version of Darwinian evolution and then it goes where it goes and well look at the 20th century that's where it goes and with it we ought to be saying hang on we need to think more wisely about how to do this so even though obviously our Christian traditions may have shaped what we now you know embrace in terms of democratic government and so on that wasn't Paul's primary purpose by any means in terms of shaping that particular way and yet what's happening with the church is that there is a multi ethnic philanthropic polychrome worship based fictive kinship group



that's a church yes which is exactly what the Romans would have loved to have attained they couldn't do it it's exactly what the European Union would love to attain but but has been able to it's exactly what America wants to attain it's very creaky and difficult shows you that simply instituting a form of government is not necessarily the art the church ought to be holding up a mirror to the world and saying actually we know how to do multicultural society wish that the church did final question uh Stephen in Sacramento California asks if you could go back in time and had the chance to interview Paul what three questions would you ask him oh goodness goodness goodness if you can't think of three one well well there are some classic passages I still when I read 1st Corinthians chapter 11 verses 2 following which is about women wearing head coverings in church I think I get what he's basically wanting to say that when women are leading in worship they should look like women and not be pretend men and that that's fine but the argument he actually uses about the creation of man and woman and the image and so on does seem to me out of kilter with the other things he says about humans being in the image of god and I'd love just to tease out whether I'm missing out on something there I spoke to someone who's written a book on that and they go down the line that they believe he's quoting others back to this yes I know that argument I am not yet convinced by that but I since I read it I haven't studied it in detail I haven't been back and actually worked through the detail um that that's that's one thing um I think I would like to know more about his imprisonment in Ephesus I've argued in the biography that there was definitely an Ephesian imprisonment and that his suffering there was what caused this deep poetry of Philippians 2 and Colossians 1 and so on to emerge and I'd love to know whether that's actually the right way of looking at that I would like to know whether in the dark 10 years after he goes back to Tarsus um whether he was ever married whether he did have a wife and if she left him or died or whatever um we simply don't know and he is carefully elusive about that in 1 Corinthians 7 so there are questions like that but of course the the main things would have to do with Jesus and with because Paul is a Jesus man that's what he's most passionately interested in and it has come back to me who this god I was who were trying to rack our brains for Lucy Peppiot oh yes yes and her book I think is um women and worship are Corinth Paul's rhetorical arguments in 1 Corinthians so that's one place to go for more on that particular view on that okay thank you so much for for answering such a wide range of questions on Paul thank you the issue of women is timely we are going to be doing that in a future podcast so look out for that as well but for the moment thank you so much Tom for being with me again my pleasure thank you for being with us for more from the show to register for our newsletter and to ask a question yourself in a future show head over to [premier.unbelievable.com](http://premier.unbelievable.com) now circumstances have meant we've had a bit of a break from being able to record fresh questions with Tom recently but that's going to change and we will be bringing you some more of your questions to Tom very soon on the show so look out for that next time and don't forget if you want to ask questions of another great thinker apology speaker and writer Sean McDowell is joining me for unbelievable live on Tuesday the 15th of November it's going to be a great time at 8

p.m. UK 3 p.m. eastern 12 noon pacific on the 15th of November we'll be taking your questions on issues like LGBT abortion pornography morality you know just the small stuff but actually stuff that's often at the center of culture wars in our society we'll be learning how to respond with grace and truth so do register it's online it's free but you do need to register at [unbelievable.live](http://unbelievable.live) be great to have you there live with us thanks for being with us on this show see you next time

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