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#137 Atheist asks: Was Jesus' death just a 'bad weekend at human camp'?

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom Wright talks about his book *The Day The Revolution Began* and answers listener Qs on Penal Substitution, the Old Testament sacrificial system, Christ's 'descent to the dead', and an atheist's claim that Christ's death was 'just a bad weekend at human camp'. First broadcast in 2018.

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Transcript

The #AskNTYanything podcast. Hello and welcome back to the show, it's Justin Breiley here, director of Premier Unbelievable. With the show brought to you in partnership with SBCK and NT-Rite online.

Tom Wright is senior research fellow at Whitcliffe Hall at the University of Oxford and a noted author, Bible scholar and much more besides. Just at the moment we're bringing you some editions of the show from the archive when we first launched in 2018. This week, Tom Wright talks about his book *The Day the Revolution began* and answers listener questions on "penal substitution, the Old Testament sacrificial system, Christ's

descent to the dead and an atheist claim that Christ's death was just a bad weekend at human camp." By the way, quick shout out to listener Paul Mackin and his whole Bible study group, Paul wrote to me saying, "I've become a big fan of the podcast discussions with Tom Wright.

My Bible study group often listens and uses the discussions as a foundation for our time together." Great work. Thank you very much Paul. Please do rate and review us on your podcast provider, it helps others to discover the show and do register over at our website to get the link to ask a question yourself.

Plus, full access to all our resources and updates, forthcoming events you'll get a free ebook to by registering at premierunbelievable.com. Well it's great to be with you again Tom. For the second of these several episodes that we're doing together in which people have sent in all kinds of interesting questions, so many to choose from but we do read them all and we try to include as many as we can in each episode. Today I thought we'd try and focus on a subject of a recent book of yours, *The Interhonorment*.

You wrote this book *The Day, The Revolution*, began. Let's go to a question though, first of all, from Galen in Cambridgeshire who asks, "My question is about your views on penal substitution and salvation. When you've raised criticism on this topic are you? A, simply trying to bring balance to the discussion about our calling here on earth and where we go when we die.

Or B, saying that the traditional understanding of penal substitution is not correct and God did not actually require Jesus to die as a sacrifice for sins." Let's start there and there's a follow up question. Sure, I think there is a sense in which I'm trying to do both of the things that Galen mentions but I would want to say my primary task is to expand what the New Testament says about the meaning of the death of Jesus. And as I do that, speaking as a first century historian, I'm trying to understand what Matthew, Mark Luke, John Paul, etc., etc., thought they were talking about.

And as I do that I find that different ways of talking about Jesus' death in the last 2000 years have sometimes got hold of some bits of what's in the New Testament but then missed out other bits and then produced distortions by emphasizing some things in one way and not rather than another. So I'm not simply starting out there in the tradition and trying to correct things. I'm trying to take a run at it from the New Testament again which actually has been my life's work to say, let's just read the Bible and see where we go with that.

But clearly there have been distortions within what has been called penal substitution. And for me quite a breakthrough in thinking about this some years ago was realizing that the phrase "penal substitution" can mean quite different things to different people according to which story you put it in. If you have an element of a story and you frame it within one narrative it means something quite different.

You know, supposing you see somebody walking down the street and carrying a briefcase, it's a very different sort of thing if actually this is the briefcase that that Russian spy was carrying two minutes ago and they just passed in the street from if it's a man who left his briefcase at home and his wife has kind of brought it to him. The same thing can mean something different in a different narrative. So penal substitution can be expressed in very damaging ways and even when preachers don't intend to do this it is quite clearly the case that this is how many, many people, particularly young people hear it.

The idea being that there is this big bullying angry guard who's very cross with us all and he's got a big stick and he's about to lash out. Unfortunately somebody gets in the way, happens to be his own son so that's how my makes it all right. And we get off.

Now last year or the year before I forget I had a public discussion on this with some colleagues in America and one angry theologian gone up from the floor and said nobody believes that, nobody teaches that these days. And one of the colleagues on the panel stood up, answered it for me, he said, I teach first year undergrads at a certain college or two-month name. He said, what Tom has said is precisely what they all think the gospel is and they're struggling to know whether to believe it or not.

So now if that is what people have heard in our hearing then we've got some serious work to do because we have taken John 3 16, God so loved the world that he gave his only son and what people have heard is God so hated the world that he killed his only son. And then when you say that in a world where there is child abuse and domestic violence and so on people think I know that bully of a God and I hate him and then the whole thing goes horribly horribly wrong. Okay, just give us, if you were to as it were, look at it in its most sympathetic light that particular way of understanding the term, what would you say is a better way of understanding it? Well, from that point of view obviously the thing to emphasize is that what happens on the cross is the sovereign act of love on behalf of the father himself.

The death of Jesus reveals the love of God. Paul says in Romans 5 God commends his love to us in that while we were still sinners the Messiah died for us. And for that of course you need a very tight nexus between God and Jesus because it makes no sense to say I love you so much I'm sending somebody else to do the dirty work.

I love you so much I'm coming to do it myself. So there is a strong Trinitarian theology built into the New Testament at that very point. I've always felt that that's sometimes where the missing link is is simply the fact that it's God himself on the cross in his sense.

Yes, which then of course causes other problems when Jesus says my God why did you abandon me etc. And that's a real problem which can only be dealt with by a very careful investigation of if you like what it meant to be Jesus what it meant to be the one in whom the living presence of Israel's God came to dwell in our midst. And that's the heart of all

the mystery of the gospel and its source of endless wonder.

But so what I've tried to do is then to say well hang on in the New Testament the results of the death of Jesus isn't simply well I was very sinful now fortunately somebody's taken my punishment so I get to go to heaven. That is actually to moralize our vision of what it means to be human. Now let them misunderstand me morals matter sin is important.

I'm not saying it doesn't but sin is a failure rather than simply the breaking of rules. It's it's the failure to be genuinely human the Greek word hamartia sin means missing the mark shooting an arrow at a target and missing. What is the target? The target is genuine humanness.

What is genuine humanness? It's reflecting God's image and whenever we attempted to sin what is actually going on is that there is something we are supposed to be doing and being to honor God in the world in our family and our own lives whatever and sin draws us away from that presents us with a cheap alternative or whatever. So that then we collude with forces of destruction and chaos and darkness and then we we basically say to the principalities and powers which by the way I don't have good language for the powers of darkness and they didn't have good language in the first century for the powers of darkness but you have to acknowledge and if after the 20th century you can't acknowledge this how stupid are we that there there is a super human power of darkness which still is active but then how does that work through us giving our human authority to idols to things that we worship. The result of that is sin which means we are bound in a tight grip.

Jesus dying for our sin releases the grip of the powers that's the central thing. Now a number of different people have emailed in essentially the same question but what do we mean when we say a phrase that comes so easily to the tongue Jesus died for us in on our behalf. Yes.

What are we actually saying in saying a phrase like that? When Paul says that he adds the phrase according to the scriptures. Now that doesn't mean I can find three proof texts E.G.I.S.I. 53. What it means is there is an entire scriptural narrative which is about how the Creator God is rescuing the world and that scriptural narrative is shaped by the Exodus particularly and then by all the things that follow from the Exodus but then coming through the whole story of Israel in exile where the people who are supposed to be bearing the solution for the world are themselves suffering the result of the problem and the Messiah, Israel's Messiah comes to the point where that story has reached rock bottom in order to take its weight upon himself and so to begin new creation.

So it's creation, covenant, exile. And when you speak to Jesus taking the weight of that upon himself again we're speaking in pictures and metaphors and so on but what I suppose the question a lot of people have is what does that literally mean in the sense what happens on the cross to release the weight that Jesus died for us in. I want to know

what literally means literally as well in that sentence which is often a problem but the clearest passage I think in Paul about this is Romans 8, 3 and 4. Having said there is no condemnation for those who are in Messiah Jesus because the law of the spirit of life in Messiah Jesus has set you free from the law sin and death because God has done what the law couldn't do since it was weak through the flesh sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh and has a sin offering.

Here's the thing. He condemned sin in the flesh. There is no condemnation for us because God passed sentence of condemnation on sin.

Interesting. Paul doesn't say God condemned Jesus. He says God condemned sin in the flesh of Jesus.

Here's one way of looking at it which is a reading of Romans 7 and 8 that God gave the law extraordinarily and Romans 7 is a very difficult passage. In order to draw sin onto one place in order to lure sin to the place where it could be condemned namely to Israel's representative who is therefore the world's representative. So Jesus dies as the representative substitute taking the condemnation on himself so that having condemned sin, sin is now itself condemned and new creation can begin and that's the energy of the spirit taking it forward.

You talked about the way that this is all building up from Old Testament to new in this and a couple of the questions that came in are in regard to how the Old Testament sacrificial system relates to Jesus' sacrifice. So Grantin Oxford asks for instance, "I understand how the sin offering in the Old Testament relates in the New Testament to Jesus' atoning sacrifice but what about other Old Testament offerings such as the wave offering, peace offering, fellowship offerings, how do they relate to New Testament theology? What's their symbolic meaning for Christians? This is a huge question and again we've got multiple misunderstandings and I grew up with the belief which is a very standard one in many systems of preaching that what's going on when in the Old Testament somebody offers a sacrifice is they come and they confess their sins over the head of the animal, the animal then gets killed so the animal is bearing the punishment for their sins. That's simply it straightforwardly wrong.

That is not what happens. The animal over whose head sin is confessed is the scapegoat which is the one animal that doesn't get killed, it gets driven off into the wilderness because having got the sins of Israel symbolically confessed on it is now unclean. You couldn't offer it to God as a sacrifice and we have to stand way back and rethink the whole thing because the language of sacrifice is woven into the way that the Western tradition has thought about atonement about Jesus dying as a punishment for sins or whatever but it's simply not what sacrifices were about.

When you read The Pentateuch which is a hard book to read, Genesis, Exodus, the Vatican's number of Deuteronomy but if you imagine reading it at a run it goes like this

creation, sin, fall idolatry etc. Call of Abraham, Abraham's family turn out to be themselves deeply dysfunctional. There is a moment of reconciliation at the end of Genesis but then they are there in slaved in Egypt and God rescues them so that the people who are carrying the solution to the world's problems will know themselves to be the rescued slaves, that's really important, but they are rescued in order that the tabernacle, the living presence of God can come and dwell in their midst.

Now that is the danger moment. To stand at the intersection of heaven and earth is a very dangerous place to be because no one can see God and live and all that. So there is a whole book of health and safety rules that I'll handle, this is called Leviticus.

And the sacrificial system in Leviticus is not about punishing animals so that we get off and go to heaven. It's about if God is going to live in the midst then the sanctuary needs to be purified, the people need to be purified. On a regular basis, it's like we say in the Lord's Prayer every day, forgive us our trespasses because we are praying that God's kingdom will come on earth as in heaven, it's the same thing.

The point of the biblical story is not how do we get into God's presences, how does God get into our presence and how then do we purify that. So then the sacrifices, the blood offerings are, notice in Leviticus numbers the animals aren't killed on an altar, that happens in pagan sacrifices. The animals are killed somewhere else, that's irrelevant.

The point is the blood which is the life is presented on the altar because the lifeblood functions as a kind of detergent to cleanse the pollution. Now as Hebrews says, that is actually only a sign and a symbol but ultimately the life of Jesus himself purifies us and the whole sanctuary and then in the letter to the Hebrews there's lots of complicated stuff about the heavenly sanctuary and the earthly sanctuary. But the point is God wants to dwell in the midst and the sacrificial system including wave offerings, heave offerings, serial offerings, you don't kill the serial offerings.

So which should have blown the whistle on that idea. That's so helpful. No it really is because I think you've really helped to distinguish between what's being meant in different terms of sacrifices.

But I have to say I have many times over my career asked Jewish scholars what did 1st century Jews think they were doing when they brought offerings to the temple. And I've started in the last 10 or 15 years to get really good answers. My colleague David Moffat in St. Andrews is an expert on this and I've learned a lot from him.

He's a Hebrew scholar particularly. Yeah. Well I hope that's also helped to answer the question that came in from Steve in Ogden, Utah who asked how the Old Testament temples sacrifice relate to thinking about the atonement.

But let's turn to another question which is from Mike in New Jersey. And he says there's a

popular atheist podcaster in the United States, David Smalley. In fact I've been on David's show myself who's been on the unbelievable podcast, that's the other podcast I present.

And he continually asks the following question to his Christian guests. How is God sending his son to earth? For instance, John 3 16, a sacrifice. He defines that David Smalley defines a sacrifice as giving up something that the person will not get back.

And he claims well Jesus was only dead for three days and God knew he'd get him back in heaven. He's even called it a bad weekend in human camp. How would you respond to that kind of objection? This reminds me of watching a child go into a maze taking a wrong turning and then in order to get out taking another wrong turning and another wrong turning.

I mean that sentence is a brilliant example of sort of one mistake on top of another on top of another. And I want to say if that's the kind of thing that that podcaster has heard Christians say then it just shows that Christians too can get themselves into a right old muddle because actually God sending Jesus is a sacrifice in the sense that I was talking about in that God wants to dwell with his people and John's gospel. That's what it's all about.

The word became flesh and tabernacled in our midst. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world so that God can dwell in our midst in Jesus and then in the person of the Spirit. And that suddenly looks totally different.

And he's just defined sacrifice as somebody giving up something that won't get back. That's a kind of a modern meaning of sacrifice. And part of the difficulty is that a word like sacrifice and a word like atonement these have gotten modern English connotations.

We don't correspond to anything in Scripture and we as Christians get fooled by this and make our own constructs and we have to go back again and again. Sorry to be boring about this. We have to go back to the original meaning of Scripture.

You've summed up quite nicely. I mean sometimes I hear people responding to these kinds of objections to say, well, it wasn't that much of a sacrifice. Jesus dying and only coming back three days later.

And some Christians might say, but what he experienced on the cross, alienation from the Father and so on, that was in a sense is a fate if you like that we can hardly imagine the consequences. It seems to me when you read the gospel, something very interesting going on because as we know with any real big event, there are several different ways you can look at it which may well all be true simultaneously. Think of Julian Barnes's novel, "Flaubert's Parrot," where his pictures of "Flaubert" appear to be totally incompatible and yet it was all the same man.

He was just a very rich, complex and rather strange character. So when you get John and when you get Luke, you might think on a first reading, it'd be wrong, but you might think that Jesus, that it's not really a problem for Jesus to die on the cross. You know, this will be unpleasant but soon over sort of thing.

When you get Matthew and Mark, it's very different. This is Jesus in Gethsemane really agonizing over it. You do get that a bit in Luke as well, but I think in Matthew and Mark it's strongest because then in Matthew and Mark it ends up with Jesus on the cross quoting Psalm 22, "My God, why did you abandon me?" And so then we have, as I think we've mentioned before, the God for sake-and-ness of God.

And some of the great theologians of our age, people like Jürgen Moltman, have tried to say it in that paradoxical way. In order to say that somewhere at the heart of the One God, there is the agony of the world being born and shared and that that mustn't be downplayed as though that was a trivial thing. And that's very difficult for us to say, although people who have shared in the agonies of the world and people who in prayer have had a sense of what some of called the darkness of God will say, even if in retrospect it seems to last only a short time.

It's still pretty appalling while it's happening. One last question. Paul in Winnipeg, Canada, asks, "What do you believe Scripture is teaching about Christ's descent to the dead mentioned in the Apostles' Creed and in the early Church Fathers' dialogue, a descent into shale or Hades, or is it as some translations of the Creed put it a descent into hell?" And perhaps you could comment on the spiritual passage that that's based on as well.

Yes, the idea of Jesus descending into shale or into the abode of the dead is based on 1 Peter. And this is after the crucifixion that this is generally seen. It's that after Jesus has died then where is he for the next 36 hours sort of thing? And in Luke it says that he says to the brigand today, "You will be with me in paradise." So how does that work? Part of our problem here is that we don't have again good English words to name what they meant much more vaguely by shale or Hades or whatever.

This is an arm-waving sort of language about gone to the place of the dead. And if we say descent into hell, then you could say, and some Christian traditions have said this, that this is the so-called harrowing of hell, that he goes down to hell in order to say, "Okay, guys, it's all over coming up out of here." If you look at Greek Orthodox icons of the resurrection, Jesus leading Adam and Eve out of the underworld. Now, there's all sorts of things going on there which I don't think the New Testament is talking about because in 1 Peter it talks about Jesus going to preach to the spirits in prison.

And then there's a couple of passages there. There's one in 1 Peter 3 when he goes and preaches, 1 Peter 3, 19, preaches to the people who formerly didn't obey when God's patience waited in the days of Noah. Looks as though this is referring to those very

strange creatures in the early chapters of the book of Genesis who were particularly wicked.

And as though Jesus has gone down to tell them, "Your doom is nigh." In other words, this isn't preaching in the sense of persuading them to believe or anything like that. This is telling them the final battle has been won and you lost. And then, however, in 1 Peter 4, 6, it says, "This is why the gospel was preached to the dead so that though judged like humans in the flesh, they might live in the spirit according to God." Now, that's a very odd passage.

I don't claim to know exactly what Peter meant or how we should then interpret it. But I think there's been quite a good amount of work done. Theologians like von Balthasar in the last century, exploring the mystery of Holy Saturday, the mystery of the day between Good Friday and Easter.

What do we say about God, about Jesus? And many have said something about that whole drama is that Jesus takes the loving presence of God down to the very deepest that human horror and anguish can go. And that's an image I think I can relate to even though I wouldn't stress it because that doesn't seem to me where the New Testament itself lays the weight. It's been another fascinating edition of our new podcast.

Thank you very much. Thank you very much. You've been with me.

Thank you. Obviously, if people want to get the fuller treatment of this subject, the day the revolution began is a great place to start at an easy, user accessible level, great book available here in the UK from SBCK. And of course, there's the online course at NT Right Online.

If you want to find out more about that, do check out links from the show page that's askNTRight.com and do send in your questions. Get yourself registered at the website if you'd like to see your question featured on a future edition of the programme. For now, thank you very much, Tom.

It's very important to seeing you for the next one. Thank you. Well, thank you for being with us for another gem from the archive.

We'll be back the same time next week. By the way, the show listener I mentioned up at the beginning of the show, Paul, also wanted to know if he can listen back to our recent church abuse and leadership scandals webinar. We hosted that a couple of weeks ago, had hundreds of people turn out for that when we did it live.

It's actually now available on our latest unbelievable podcast and as a video show to for you there, Paul. I know many others will be interested in watching and hearing that as well, available from PremierUnbelievable.com. Also the place to register to ask a question and for everything else you need from the show. Thanks for being with us.

See you next time.

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[silence]