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#211 Singleness, dating and being unequally yoked. Should christians date non-christians? What's the point of it all? Puzzled and pastoral questions this week with Tom

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Help! I am a new christian and I'm worried I'm unequally yoked in my relationship? What is the biblical view of singleness? Should Christians date non Christians? Was Jesus at my mother's deathbed? What's the point of it all? In this episode Tom answers the personal, pastoral and puzzled questions of listeners. • Subscribe to the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast: <https://pod.link/1441656192> • More shows, free eBook, newsletter, and sign up to ask Tom your questions: <https://premierunbelievable.com> • For live events: <http://www.unbelievable.live> • For online learning: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/courses> Your support matters to us: • Support us in the USA: <http://www.premierinsight.org/unbelievableshow> • Support us in the rest of the world: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/donate>

Transcript

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Welcome to this replay of Ask NT Wright Anything, where we go back into the archives to bring you the best of the thought and theology of Tom Wright. Answering questions submitted by you, the listener. You can find more episodes as well as many more resources for exploring faith at premierunbelievable.com. And registering there will

unlock access through the newsletter to updates, free bonus videos and e-books.

That's premierunbelievable.com. And now for today's replay of Ask NT Wright Anything. The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast. Well, I'm sitting down again with Tom to ask a number of questions and we get all kinds of questions.

In fact, we get questions every day come in via the website, believe it or not, Tom. And so it's always hard to pick and choose between them. But some I never quite know which category to put into.

So today, I'm putting a few under the general banner of pastoral and puzzled questions. So this is quite, I'm just flinging a whole load of different stuff for you today on the podcast. caveats again, as before, when it comes to pastoral issues, you can't be someone's pastor on a podcast, always seek to be part of a community where you can be helped through those issues.

But we'll do our best to give some thoughts on some of these issues. So here's an interesting one to start off with. Scott, who's in British Columbia, Canada says, I'm an adult convert to Christianity at 55 years old and would appreciate your insight on a question.

I've had a long journey to faith started about 12 years ago, but I'm the only believer in my household, which includes my wife of 30 happy years. Recently, I found out that the church I've been attending teaches that couples should not be unequally yoked, as Paul describes it in Second Corinthians. I think this has taken out of context was wondering what your thoughts are.

on this verse, please. Right. That's a passage in two Corinthians six, where Paul quite suddenly after a whole chunk on the nature of his apostolic ministry issues rather severe warning, and it seems to be against a Christian and a non Christian now entering into marriage.

And that seems to be the Christian version of the Jewish endogamy. That is to say, within Orthodox Jews of Paul's day, Jews would only marry Jews. And it looks as though Paul is translating that into if you're a Christian, then if you have a choice about these things, you marry another Christian, you keep it in a family matter.

However, simultaneously in First Corinthians seven, and in the so-called pastoral letters, the Timothy's, Paul is dealing with the fact which must have been everyday occurrence in the church of one member of a marriage partnership, becoming a Christian and the other not. And you find that in First Peter as well, where advice is given to wives who may be Christians whose husbands are not believers. And Peter doesn't say you should leave them, you should get out.

And in First Corinthians seven, Paul doesn't say you should quit. They both say that

basically if you can live together, you should live together. And it sounds as though this is a happy marriage.

And I'm sure that Paul and Peter would say no, this is fine. But there's sometimes in some marriages comes a point where the unbelieving partner says, I can't be doing a few Christians. This is completely ruining my life, having to share a house with you.

And we have to realize in the first century, this was a major thing within the pagan world. You'd go into an ordinary house and there were little shrines everywhere and little gods who you would give a pinch of incense to a lighter candle in front of. And you would say little prayers when you came downstairs in the morning or when you were coming in and out of the house, and the Christian would simply stop doing that.

And for many first century Christians, not least slaves and a lot of Christians were slaves. It would be the slave's job to light that incense or whatever. And so there were all sorts of difficult moments of navigation which make our navigations now look really rather small and easy.

Things that were taken for granted which suddenly the Christians didn't do anymore or didn't want to do anymore. And that's when, as I mentioned in a previous podcast, there's that moment when Nehem and the Syrian is healed by Elisha and says, look, when I get back home, I have to go with my master into the house of his God. And when he bows, I bow and that's just the way it is in Elisha's, that's fine, fully understood.

And it seems to me there are navigations and there are moments which might look to the outsider as compromise but which in fact are the glasses half full here and it's better to be half full than half empty. And as you say, Paul addresses this issue speaking to wives and so on whose husbands are not believing and certainly doesn't give them your eyes, well, chuck it in. It's about even possibly winning them over with their rights like behaviour.

That's first Peter says that. But first Corinthians, it's similar in a way that if the unbelieving partner is happy, then that's fine. And he says, because otherwise your children would be unholy whereas in fact they're holy.

In other words, the children of a marriage in which one partner is a Christian are to be considered as part of the household of faith. Now this in a sense then answers the question I'm sure for Scott, you know, of course he should continue in the marriage and be a good Christian within that. I suppose it is a slightly different question for someone wondering whether to marry someone who does not share that.

That's precisely it. But you see, it's the same in the postures, it's quite clear that many people coming into the church were polygamists. And polygamy was reasonably widespread in the ancient world.

And the answer is you don't choose one spouse out of three or four and send the rest packing but such a person doesn't get ordained. Isn't that interesting? That you don't make that person a publicly visible office bearer in the church because the church has a responsibility to witness to God's original intention, which is monogamy. Very interesting.

Yes. I mean, what would your advice be to a Christian who takes the faith seriously and but he does find themselves for whatever reason attracted to in a relationship with someone who does not share their faith? I would say watch out. I've seen that again and again where where somebody says, you know, I'm so in love.

I'm sure it'll work out. I'm sure she or he will come round eventually. And, you know, if this is a world where he's 70 year old saying, I've seen people try it and sometimes in the goodness of God, it does work more often it doesn't and they get dragged down.

And it's very hard to continue, particularly when times are tough, when sickness strikes or death in the family or whatever, and you just have completely different visceral reactions to what's going on. Some people can hang on and stick with it through that. But that is really, really tough.

And I want to say, as a Christian married to a Christian for nearly 48 years now, marriage is hard work and tough enough as it is without having that as well pulling you apart. A related question here from Lynn in Pleasant Hill, California says, what is the biblical way to talk about singleness in the church? We find it easy to talk about marriage and families because we're the bride of Christ and we are the children of God. But we don't often address singleness.

What should we be saying to encourage the unmarried and those without family in our midst? It's a really good question. And I know that there are many churches that have taken that quite seriously in this last generation. And I've heard single people in churches say, plaintiffly, you know, everything seems to be organized around dinner parties and home groups where it's couples and couples and couples.

And you're the kind of the spare wheel. As though somehow you haven't quite fulfilled your purpose if you haven't got yourself neatly married often. Exactly.

And of course, some churches are really rather pushed that hard. And interestingly, I noticed that Jesus was single. I noticed that Paul was single.

Certainly when he's going around being an apostle, it's possible that he'd been married and widowed or that his intended bride had given him the push. When he came back from Damascus with his head full of this Jesus stuff. And this is one of the really interesting things that in the New Testament and the early church, there seem to be two tracks, both of which are seen as witness to the Kingdom of God.

That the married life is seen as a witness to God's intention to bring heaven and earth together at last, right from Genesis to Revelation. That's how it works. But singleness is seen as the not yet, as the sign that actually we are in between people.

We are looking forward to the great day, but we're not there yet. And Paul has pragmatic reasons as well, says that for him as an apostle, being single has enabled him to do things that married people couldn't. And famously in the Church of England's last generation, somebody like John Stott had taken that apparently is a quite definite decision.

But he could see he had a vocation which really was not going to make life easy for a spouse. And one honors that. And Paul himself, I suppose different circumstances, but even advises in his letters, if you're not married, don't seek a partner.

Yes, well, but that's first Corinthians 7, which is tricky because it comes with a little explanatory clause, which is because of the present distress. And as Bruce Winter, one of the scholars has really worked on this, points out, this is written in the early 50s when there was this massive famine over half of the Mediterranean world. And Paul is saying, this is a time for battenning down the hatches, not for thinking, oh, yes, life is more complicated.

Exactly. So let's just get through this. And some people have said, oh, that's because the world's going to end.

And that's a red herring. That's not what he's talking about at all. Most more that could be said about that, but I hope it's been helpful in some way, Lynne.

And I suppose the advice to people who do find themselves best with a marriage is that this isn't an exclusive little thing that God's given you. It should be open to people who are single in the sense of being hospitable and obviously. And including them without embarrassment in social and cultural events and so on.

Don't make it difficult to be single in your church, that's for sure. David is in Bedford in the UK, says, thanks for the faith-enhancing podcast. It gives a little bit of background to his situation here, which may inform the question.

It says, I grew up in an ultra-conservative family where my mother was dominated by my father. Hats in church, no makeup, must be quiet, et cetera. Sunday was no bike and no running around, i.e. fairly miserable.

But having heard Tom unpack scripture with context and nuance, it's been liberating, but leaves a few questions. And I'm only going to ask one of the questions you ask here, David, which is, if the Bible is God's primary way of communicating who he is and how we should live, why did he not make it much clearer for all folk to get it on a first reading? Not everyone is a New Testament scholar or has access to one. Oh boy, yeah, I

had a similar question to this from a student just the other day, who had been taught the doctrine of the perspicacity of scripture or whatever.

The scripture is, by definition, comprehensible. Of course, the trouble is, if you were born knowing New Testament Greek and ancient Hebrew, that would be fine. But somebody has had to translate this, and they've used dictionaries, and they've studied other books from the period and trying to get at the nuances of the language.

And often this comes from that sort of sense that the Bible ought to be open, get it, got it, end of conversation. Whereas in my lifelong experience of being a Bible reader from an early age, the Bible is a book which forces you to grow up in your thinking. It forces you to address questions you didn't really want to address, and to deal with issues that it raises that you would rather not raise, or that you just hadn't got around to yet.

And each time I come back through the Bible and I read more or less the whole Bible at least once a year in the New Testament, at least twice the systems I have, I find myself thinking, I never saw that before. Where's that first been all my life? Because it suddenly jumps off the page, and my kind of rule of thumb is that I think that's part of Christian maturity is growing up into things that were there all along, but for which we weren't ready yet. And if one could just get the whole thing straight off, then we would be left as spiritual pygmies, we'd just be babes really.

That's not of course to say that there isn't plenty to be going on with. Anyone who reads the Psalms and the Gospels will have quite enough to be going on with. There will be lots they don't understand, but the love of God in Jesus will jump off the page and say, this is for you too, here's how you join, come on, kneel down and worship, and here in the Psalms are some of the ways you might be praying as you're doing that.

And then from there, move out in whichever direction the Holy Spirit leads you. I mean, just drawing in some of what he said about his own experience growing up in this ultra conservative family. I suppose one thing that makes me think of is people take things in the Bible, and for some people it leads them off in one direction about a very legalistic form of Christianity or whatever, for others, it's a very different expression of that.

And I suppose David says, shouldn't it be clear somehow, but I suppose it's all about who's reading the text. Well, who's reading the text and who says and who's in charge and so on. And then we get into these different things of different churches have emphasized different things.

And as you grow up as a Christian and realize that there are Christians down the road who seem to be equally devout, but who worship in a slightly different way and who aren't so concerned about hats in church or whatever is, but may be concerned about some other issue, then trying to navigate that is part of mature Christian life. And the good news is we see that going on in New Testament as well. People who come from

different ethnic cultural backgrounds trying to serve Jesus in the same fellowship and to love one another.

So we shouldn't be surprised if those demands are made on this. And even, or was it Peter who said, I know you're finding some of Paul's teachings difficult. Yes, yes.

Not as though he's the first readers who got it first. Absolutely. Absolutely.

But it's the same with any great art or music. I go into art galleries from time to time and sometimes I stand in front of a painting. It just isn't doing anything for me.

But I know this is something that people have come from the other side of the world to see. So I don't say, what a stupid painter. I say, Tom Wright, your art appreciation isn't really doing too well at the moment.

Here's a completely different question from Marian in Surrey. She says, my mother, 91 years old, who was a faithful follower of Jesus all her life, died a month ago. I was with her when she died and as she was struggling with her breathing, she suddenly looked up to her right.

And I felt convinced that someone was in the room waiting for her. She looked back at me and took two more breaths before she went. And then the presence went with her.

John 14 verse 3 says that when everything is ready, I will come and get you so that you will always be with me where I am. Was it Jesus who came to get her? If not, was it an angel taking her to be with him? Where do you begin with that one? Wow. Well, bless you for raising the question because obviously, I was with my mother when the week before she died a year ago at age 94.

So a similar sort of situation. Though as far as I know, there was no such visitation. But these stories are quite frequent, actually.

When you minister with people who have lost somebody they love, often one hears tales like this. My late father-in-laws, he was taking his last breaths, apparently would, from time to time, look up and chuckle and give a smile as though a recognition. And my brother-in-law who was with him at the time said, I wonder who it was he was seeing.

And some skeptical neurologists would say, this is simply the brain dying, producing memories, et cetera. And from one point of view, I would say, so what, it might be that. But just as Jesus can use whatever means he wants to reveal himself.

So it's perfectly plausible that Jesus would use our own physicality, the way we're wired, in order to reveal himself. I don't think we need to know. I think we just need to know that at that moment, the God of all creation is very present to those who are in extremities.

He knows perfectly well what death is. He knows perfectly well who we are. And he loves us far too much just to leave us comfortless, as John 14 says.

I've heard again in similar circumstances, people perhaps who a short time after losing someone have felt that person's presence with. It felt for even seeing. Yes, indeed.

And again, I suppose it's always possible to give a sort of neurological explanation for this grief and that sort of thing. But for them it's obviously felt very real and people have believed that. But is there a problem there? The idea that a soul is still hanging around in some way or not really? No, I think that was well known in the ancient world as well.

There are all sorts of tales like that. And of course, that's what the early church think is happening in Acts 12 when Peter comes and knocks at the door. And the little maid doesn't let him in.

It's Peter, it's Peter. And they say it must be his angel. In other words, they think Peter has been executed in the prison and that this is a post-mortem visitation.

It turns out not to be his actually Peter himself. But again, we've had one of those in my family and some close friends who tragically their daughter living outside of the country was murdered in cold blood in a random shootout. And her fiancé suddenly found her in the room with him many, many miles away and then she was gone again.

And that was kind of a saying goodbye. And I just think God can do whatever God wants to do. And in the mercy of God, these things seem to be benign.

They seem to be a way of saying, this is a shock, but I'm okay or something. And I think that's about all we can do with it really. And to thank God and hold it in prayer in God's room.

And if it were me, I would bring that memory and that reality very much with me to the next time that I was at the communion service at the Eucharist and just enfold it within the love of God in the bread and the wine. Before we rejoin the rest of today's podcast, I have a very special offer for you to help you have an even more meaningful spiritual experience this Easter. As you know, NT Right is without doubt one of the greatest Christian thinkers and apologists of our time.

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Thank you. We've got a really diverse selection of questions and this is another completely different one. Micah is in Alabama.

USA and he begins his question with, so what is the whole point? And here's the question I'll read it in full. If it's all about believing in Jesus being placed in this heaven category, then who cares what I do after that? Why does it matter if I do well at work? Why does it matter what career I choose? Why does it matter if I stay with a spouse who's unfaithful or direct my kids towards a faith when I'm unsure myself? I get that Jesus died on the cross for my sins, but I don't understand why he put me here to begin with. Couldn't we have just had a session in court with a judge? All present, the one to believe in Jesus Christ, raise your right hand.

Very good. You can go to heaven now. The bailiff will escort you.

What's the point to all the agony in my existence between the day I accept Christ and the day I die? What is the point? Can't we just get to heaven and be done with it? That's a great question. And it's precisely that question which I was trying to address in two books that I wrote a few years ago. One is surprised by hope and the other is in America.

It's called After You Believe. And I'll tell Michael the story of why that book is called After You Believe because the English title is virtue reborn. And my American publisher said we can't use that title because nobody in America buys books called virtue.

So I said, so what you're going to call it is after you. I said, what does after you believe mean? And he said, it's about the embarrassing interval between the baptism and the funeral. In other words, you've become a Christian.

You've said a prayer. You're going to church, whatever. But please can you go to heaven straight away? And what's all this bit in the middle? And the answer is Christian formation.

You are to be formed according to the pattern of Christ. In order that through your formation, God will go on revealing himself in ways that you can't even imagine yet within his world. So my formation isn't just about me getting my act together so that I can be fit for heaven or whatever, because the other thing is, as in surprise by hope, it isn't about going to heaven.

It's about being part of the new creation here already. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, if anyone is in Christ, new creation. And that doesn't just mean you personally are a new

creation, though you are.

It means this is the sign and part of the means of God's new creation, which began when Jesus came out of the tomb on Easter day and will be completed when he returns to make all things new. And my load star for this, in fact, news that phrase, which I think is attributed to Mike Pence among others, is 1st Corinthians 15:58, where Paul says at the end of this long chapter about resurrection, he doesn't say, therefore sit back and relax because we're off to heaven. He says, no, because there is new creation, which has already begun in Jesus, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

That's the thing. Everything we do in this life, in Christ and by the Spirit, every poem we write, every prayer we say, every time we help somebody else, literally or metaphorically, across the road, every time we are sitting next to and comforting somebody in sickness, whatever. Somehow all of that and all the art and music and so on that we do on the basis of faith, somehow that is all part of God's new creation will be enhanced when Jesus returns.

Nothing will be wasted. Nothing will be wasted. I was speaking to a meeting in New York recently, and as I said some of this in my book, *Surprised by Hope*, and a young man came up to me who's been a missionary in the Philippines, and he had that sentence tattooed on his arm.

I've got a photograph. The sentence about everything we do, whether it's this or that or the other, nothing will be wasted. It will all be part of the new creation.

That was, I was very moved to discover that was his Vadi Makum, as it were, as a missionary, in a tough situation. Everything we do in Christ and by the Spirit is part of God's plan for the eventual renewal of creation. So have a much bigger vision of new creation than just heaven is the answer to that.

And in a way, part of that is very tough. I mean, no one's denying that there's a lot of pain and agony involved in that formation and so on. And you only have to read the New Testament, and it says that on every page.

Yeah. And that's part of the deal. In a way, you've asked the question that's at the core of much of what Tom has been writing for most of his life, Michael, in that way, that it's not about simply getting a get into heaven, and then we're evacuated.

It's about the difference that makes as we bring that kingdom in together. Well, and then heaven is simply the temporary stage before God brings heaven and earth together. I want to say to Micah, go and read Ephesians 1, verse 10.

OK. It's all there. Some homework for you, Micah.

OK. Final question. This is, the others have been big, life, death, life questions.

This one much more practical. It's a career question. Nicholas in Grass Valley, California, says, Hello.

I'm a college student who eventually wants to get into biblical scholarship. I'm wondering how you go about your research, Tom, as a research professor, and what are some skills I should develop in order to one day do the same? Oh, my goodness. OK.

When I was very, very little, one of my dreams was to become an astronomer, and I remember an aunt taking me to an observatory one day, and the astronomer who we met said, Now, young man, astronomy is mathematics and mathematics and more mathematics, and I decided then that I didn't want to be an astronomer after all. So I want to say to this good young man, being a research professor of New Testament is Greek and Hebrew, Hebrew and Greek and Hebrew. And if that turns you on great, if it doesn't then please find something else to do, because you have to know the first century, I mean, I'm a New Testament scholar, you have to know the first century like the back of your hand, and you have to know the world that the Jews lived in, which means soaking yourself in their scriptures, figuring out how they were reading those scriptures in what we call the second temple period, in the last two or three centuries BC, and learning the ins and outs of the New Testament and the early Christian world out beyond into the second century, in such a way that you feel at home there that you can anticipate their reactions.

And this is called history. This is what historians do, is so to become at home learning to think the thoughts of people who think very differently to ourselves, learning to be surprised by the way they thought, and then see, oh, I see you were retrieving that text, and because of this sociocultural situation, you construed it that way, oh my goodness, then this makes sense of, and this goes on and on and on, and it's a constant delight and having good graduate students helps, but for me I'm constantly turning little corners in my own reading and understanding, think here's something I never understood before, but suddenly it makes so much more sense. And, you know, many researchers in many academic fields are frankly bored by the time they're 50, because they're sort of playing out.

I'm 70, and I'm as excited by this text now, so I was about 20. Do you still discover new things? Oh, heavens yes, yes. I just did a course on Galatians, and pretty well every week when I was preparing the seminar, I was thinking, oh yes, that's how that works.

You know, read a couple of new commentaries and not necessarily agree with them, but they kind of nudge you in a new way and force you. Oh, wait a minute, supposing. And then you go off and look up the words and the passages and the parallels, and there's a bit of me that is never happier than when pulling the Greek lexicon off the shelf to check what the parallel usages are.

Now, there's another bit of me that is never happier than when teeing up at all four. But it's a real delight once you get into it. It leads me to maybe a final question, which is, you know, you've been doing this research in an academic position for the last several years, and that will come to an end in the not-too-distant future.

Do you still envision yourself sitting down and digging into the research just in a, you know, in your own capacity rather than? Absolutely. I've got several more projects that I want to complete, and at any given moment, any researcher such as me has a bunch of stuff sort of stacked up like planes above Heathrow waiting to come in, and my experience is some of them will and some of them won't. And that's in a sense up to God as I pray and wait and try and do what I'm supposed to do.

But there are some things I definitely want to do, a couple of comedies I really want to write. I would like to finish my big series, but that may or may not happen. I may have to hand it on to my heirs and successors.

I was talking to a wise colleague not long ago who had retired, and he said, of course, I'm still researching and writing. He said, the great thing is when you're retired you don't need to put in so many footnotes. And I'm not quite sure about that, because when you want to make an argument against people who are going strongly the other direction, then the footnotes are kind of like the hobnails on your boots when you're walking up a steep hill.

They help you to get the traction. But yes, I think there is then a question of location as to where I'm going to be and how many of my current books in my current library I'll be able to take with me. Who knows? Hopefully, maybe a bit of time for some golf as well.

Oh, hopefully. I hope I'm not too young. I'm too old to improve my handicap at some point.

Anyway, Tom, thank you very much for being with me for today's programme. It's always fun to sit down with you. But for now, it's been a great joy again.

And we'll see you next time. Thank you very much. Absolutely.

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