

# OpenTheo

## #128 Why did God make childbirth difficult? More questions about Eden and the Fall

July 28, 2022



### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Were Adam and Eve's pre-fall bodies like the resurrected Jesus? Was marriage a post-fall accommodation? Why does Genesis say God made childbirth more difficult after the fall? NT Wright answers more questions on the Garden of Eden and the Creation story.

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## Transcript

the ask anti right anything podcast. Welcome back to the show I'm Justin Briley, director of Premier Unbelievable and this show brought to you in partnership with SBCK and anti right online. In fact, we've got links to special deals to both of our partners with today's show.

And on the show today, we're asking why did God make childbirth difficult? More questions about Adam, Eve, Eden and the fall today. Today Tom will be answering questions like were Adam and Eve's pre-fall bodies like the resurrected Jesus was

marriage a post-full accommodation. Why does Genesis say God made childbirth more difficult after the fall? Okay, so let's see how Tom handles these ones today.

By the way, just want to say big thank you to everyone who's responded to our call for child sponsorship with compassion which we put out two weeks ago. We've seen such a generous response from listeners after Jay, a compassion child himself shared his story with Tom of going from the slums of Kenya to a new life. But there's still lots of kids we'd love to see sponsored.

We're shooting for a whole village, 100 kids to be sponsored through the show. So if you can sponsor from the USA, then just text Justin to 83393 and that'll start your journey off. Or from anywhere in the world, go to the website [compassion.com/justin](http://compassion.com/justin) and as a thank you to anyone sponsoring from the USA, we'll send you a copy of my book Unbelievable.

So if you can join the effort, that would be amazing. I'll update you again in a few weeks time on how we're doing. For now, let's jump back into Genesis.

Welcome back to today's show and we've got more of your questions today on creation, evolution, Adam and Eve, the Garden of Eden, that sort of thing. It comes up very, very frequently, Tom. And a lot of these questions I think come from the fact that a lot of churches place a great deal of emphasis on the first chapters of Genesis and exactly, you know, how old is the age of the earth and that sort of thing.

Now, I know that your perspective probably differs from many in the US, especially who, you know, are part of the Young Earth Creation movement and so on. But these, sometimes even for those who don't sort of necessarily go that route, it still leaves lots of questions about, well, how does the Bible interact with modern science and evolution and everything else? So if you're listening to this without having heard our first episode on this, do go back in the podcast and listen to that first, because some of what we're saying will really be carrying on from that. Why don't we pick up, though, with the question about pre-fall bodies.

Ashley in Los Angeles is asking, if the Garden of Eden was a place where heaven and earth overlapped, were Adam and Eve's bodies before the fall, like Jesus' resurrection body? So I'd be interested, first of all, in this theory that the Garden of Eden was a place where heaven and earth overlapped, what you make of that, Tom, and then this question about whether that means there were sort of pre-fall, you know, Jesus-like bodies for Adam and Eve. That's a great question. I confess that before I read this question, I'd never quite thought of that as a possibility, as an option, but it's a very interesting one.

I do believe that the Creation story in Genesis envisages God making a world in which heaven and earth do overlap, so that we are not surprised, or we shouldn't be surprised, when Adam and Eve hear the voice of God walking in the garden in the cool of the day. It looks as though the creation as envisaged in Genesis 1 and 2 is a place where God wants

to be at home with his image-bearing human creatures. And however we envisage this in terms of, as I said in the previous episode, God slowly, beautifully, making this world, 14 billion years of it, to the point where it makes sense to create the creatures in his own image, who will then one day be the vehicle which he himself will use, through whom he will himself come into his creation.

It makes sense to think of this as a heaven and earth overlapping place. However, that doesn't mean that it is now the ultimate new creation. Genesis 1 and 2 describe a forward-looking project, not a tableau, so that the story of the Bible is not about, here it was, it was all perfect, then it went horribly wrong, and now God's putting it back to perfection again.

It's a very good creation, but it's very good because it's going to go to the place God wants it to go. And it's very interesting when you look at the book of Revelation and discover that in Revelation 21 and 22, which seems very consciously to echo Genesis 1 and 2 in all sorts of ways, it isn't going back to the garden, it's the creation of a garden city. Very interesting that after the fall, when Cain kills Abel and then Cain goes off, the first thing that Cain does is to build a city, which is interesting, who are these other people who are inhabiting this city, etc, etc.

And it's as though humans know in their bones that the garden is the beginning and the city is the goal, but it's supposed to be a garden city, a place of both, rather than what, from Cain onwards, humans make of it, which is a tower of Babel effectively, and that's how Genesis 3 to 11 or 4 to 11 really works, I think, compared with what then happens, which is God's call of Abraham to be the beginning of the renewal of the human race, and he is a childless nomad, a wanderer with no place to call his own until eventually dot, dot, dot. So that I think when we're thinking about what was going on at the beginning, it wasn't that they had new, creational bodies, that was to come, they were the beginning of the purpose, which would eventually lead there, because of sin and death that had to happen through the incredibly painful means of God's long-awaited incarnation, including his taking on himself the weight of sin and death and dealing with it. So it's a very huge, extraordinary story, but that's the way I would tell it.

I mean, just taking the story as it's told, I've heard it said that in a sense, we mustn't necessarily take it for granted that Adam and Eve was somehow immortal in their so-called pre-fall state, but rather that in the sense that Jesus in his risen state is, because it was the tree of life which sustained them in that sense, but it's simply when they had no long had access to that and were put out of the garden, then they would age and die eventually as anyone else would. Which would then be the fulfillment of in the day that you eat of it, then you will die, because in the day that you eat of it, of the tree of the lodge of good and evil, then they are kicked out of the garden, they don't have access to the tree of life. There are at least two theories about that.

I have tended to think that they had not yet eaten of the tree of life, because it looks as though they're put out of the garden, lest they take of the tree of life and live forever in their now sinful state. I know others who say no, they were constantly eating of the tree of life, and so they would have gone on staying alive in some form. Would they have grown old? I'm not sure that we're meant to be asking those questions.

I think it's the wrong questions to be addressing to that text. Again, there's a kind of hermeneutical humility required here to say, what are these texts actually trying to tell us rather than, here are the questions we came up with a couple of thousand years later, let's force them back on these texts and see if we can wrench something out of them. And we have to be very careful when we do that.

We like to go as 21st century people and try and pull apart texts which weren't always meant to be read in exactly the way we tend to like to read things today. That doesn't mean there isn't a fruitful dialogue, or there isn't a potentially fruitful dialogue. It's just that we have to be very careful.

I was thinking about this yesterday in conversation with my wife about, I can't hear what the issue was, but it was something where we tend to assume that a word, oh, I know what it was, it was when Jesus says, do this in remembrance of me in the Greek is *anemnesin*, eastern *anemnesin*. And a much later theology talked about *anemnesis* and tried to build into that all sorts of theories about the Eucharist, about the breaking of bread and so on, which are not part of that Greek word *anemnesis* in the first century. But it's the question of then the medieval period looking back and saying, well, that's the word Jesus used so it must mean what we now mean by it.

That's the trick. And that's a very slippery slope that you get onto when you start playing that game. I sometimes wish I was there with a microphone when you're round the lunch table with Maggie for having these wonderful conversations.

Maggie, it's funny because Maggie and I do not often have that kind of conversation, but it was it was something that my son Oliver had said who was with us. And so anyway, yes. Yes, anyway, let's go to another question.

And again, you might need to unpack sort of exactly what we mean by fall pre fall or whatever in this question from Stephen in Nashville, Tennessee, but it says in the resurrection, will all things be returned to their original intended pre fall state? And if so, what does that mean for marriage in the resurrection, they neither married nor are given in marriage. So does that mean marriage as we understand it was a post fall accommodation rather than the original plan? Yes, I have known people who've said that marriage, including sexual relations, was something that had to happen after the fall and that before the fall, they wouldn't have done that stuff. That seems me ridiculous.

In Genesis one and two, it seems pretty clear that Adam and Eve are told be fruitful and

multiply. And this is part of God's original plan. And again, we have to be careful.

Genesis one and two describe the beginning of a project, the launching of a project, not a projected final state yet. So when Jesus says that in the resurrection, they neither marry nor are given in marriage. He is saying that at the moment, marriage and sex and childbearing and so on, our part of God's plan to complete the business of human beings as it were colonizing the earth on God's behalf.

That that has a bad feel for us because we know what human beings have done when they've tried to do that. But the genuine idea of humans reflecting God's glory and stewardship into the world was always creative and healing and upbuilding and not destructive and exploitative, etc. So that then in the new creation, when there will be no more death, there will be no more need for procreation to renew and restore the species and to keep the human race going forwards, as it were.

That doesn't mean that the relationships we have in the present life become completely irrelevant. And there are all sorts of debates in some of the early fathers about whether there will be sexual relations between the risen bodies of husbands and wives or anybody else either. I'm not sure again we can know that or even should know that.

It seems to me that part of what's going on here is a sense that where we are at the moment, there are certain things which are enormously important to us, which are built in to be enormously important, which are about God's plan for being fruitful, multiplying, etc. Once cheekily summarized the vocation of Genesis 1 as sex gardening and God, being fruitful, looking after the world and worshiping the Creator. And in the new creation, all of those things will turn out to be signposts pointing to the greater and deeper reality.

I'm reminded of C.S. Lewis's remark about a small boy who, on being told that sex was the greatest pleasure known to human beings, asked if you ate chocolates at the same time, because in his world, eating chocolates was the greatest pleasure he could imagine, to which I suppose the answer might be, well, you could, but that's probably not the point or something like that. But in other words, what looms largest in our present life, money, sex and power, basically, we will look back on from the future life and say, yes, that was important. They were signposts pointing to this greater good which we now enjoy, so that the relationships between former spouses in God's new creation, remembering that for much of human history, people have had very short life expectancies.

So quite a lot of people have been married two or three or four times simply because of regular death. I think that's not something that we're given to know, and I don't think it will be a problem. How God will work that out, I don't know.

What I do know is that fidelity, spousal fidelity, is one of the things which will shine

brightly in God's new creation, even if one has been faithful to successive spouses because previous ones have died or whatever, it's the fidelity which reflects God's own faithfulness to creation, and that is what will make us who we will be. And another sort of quite practical question about the outworking of the fall and sin and so on, and these are two questions I'll sort of try and roll into one from Jessica, first of all, in Bray in California and Derek in Selena. So Jessica's question is, this might be a variation on other questions on suffering evil and the sovereignty of God that had been previously asked, but I was wondering if you might say something specifically about Eve's curse in Genesis 3 where God greatly increases Eve's pain and child bearing as well as the ruling over of husbands over wives.

What does this tell us if anything about the character of God is goodness and the nature of his intentions towards humanity and towards women in particular, in light of the suffering that women have endured historically and presently, either due to child bearing or gender based violence? I suppose the same question could be asked about Adam's curse or the curse of the ground, but I'm more interested in the question as applied to Eve, and then again to follow up with Derek, my wife and I are currently pregnant with our first child, a baby boy, but my wife keeps asking me, why did God make pregnancy and birth so difficult? When it is evident that God does love new life? I've been stumped, so I thought I'd ask you, thanks so much. I've learned so much from your podcasts and writing. So similar question, but asked perhaps with two different emphases here, Tom.

Firstly, Jessica just feels, look, it feels like this is, yeah, where do you go first of all with Jessica's question then? What does this say about the character of God that he imposes apparently this sort of suffering on women and so on? Yeah, I speak, I mean, I should say her speakers as a father and a grandfather, and of course, as a husband, and I was present for three of the four births which my wife gave. I couldn't be there for the first one because it involved a small operation. But so I do have some quite literally hands on experience of just what an extraordinary thing child birth is, a beautiful thing, but extraordinary and dangerous and frightening and painful thing it is.

I don't have a good easy answer for this, but I do think as a matter of principle, it's very difficult to look at one aspect of the world the way it is and say, if I were God, I wouldn't have done it like this. Somebody said to me the other day that a five-year-old granddaughter, this was a friend up in Scotland, five-year-old granddaughter had had a terrible day at school and then it all gone wrong at home, etc, etc. And at the end of the day, had said to her mother, "When is God going to make the new world?" And the mother said, "Well, we're not supposed to we don't know that." And she said, "Well, I hope when he does, there won't be another day like this one." And that's a wonderful characteristic view of we understand the world the way it is, but hang on, what's God up to here.

And I think we only really know who God is when we look carefully at Jesus and when we

see Jesus' compassion for those who are suffering, and when we see Jesus' compassion for his own mother, woman behold your son, son behold your mother, we start there, we start with Jesus and we work out cautiously and humbly towards thinking if Jesus is the living embodiment of God the Creator, which is what classic Christianity has always taught, then what can we say? Not let's start with the thorns and thistles and the pain and childbirth and then say, why would God have done that? Because I don't know and I suspect nobody knows quite what those lines in Genesis 3 mean about how it would have been otherwise. If it hadn't been for the fall, would childbirth have been perfectly easy? Childbirth is, I think, harder and easier in different species. I'm not a biologist, I'm not a zoologist, so I don't know the detail of that.

But I think human childbirth is particularly difficult very often. But I don't think that is a special punishment for the woman. I think this is a way of the writer and editor of Genesis sensing prophetically the purpose of God into and through the present sad, tragic, fallen situation.

It's a way of saying every aspect of who we now are, including the most intimate. And you see, be fruitful and multiply and look after the garden is then reflected in it's going to be hard work, this being fruitful and multiplying, and it's going to be hard work in looking after the garden so that the female and the male problems reflect the deterioration of that original vocation. But I think what's happened then, and I detect this behind that first question, I very much resonate with this, is that in many parts of Western culture, sadly I hear it from many people in some parts of North America more now than I do from Britain or Europe, is that people have men have taken bits like this out of context and have used them surreptitiously or sometimes quite explicitly as ways of putting women down of quote, keeping them in their place, etc, etc, etc.

Some of the dynamic in the present debates, dare I say about the Roe versus Wade issue, belong on the same map, though that is so controversial and many cited that it wouldn't be a good example would help us to get into it. I just think it scares up a lot of impulses and some of those impulses have been incredibly negative towards women. I very much appreciate and understand that and I think you cannot then have a chain all the way back from that to, oh well that's what how God wanted it to be in Genesis 3, I just don't think it works like that.

And you can see this quite clearly in the New Testament, where Jesus values his female companions, where he gives Mary Magdalene the first task of evangelism, go and tell my brothers that I'm ascending to the Father, etc. And where Paul regards his female co-workers as very much co-workers and not, oh we can't give this letter to Phoebe because she'll probably drop it overboard by accident or anything silly like that. So I think we see in the New Testament the glorious redemption of all that had gone wrong and the church is supposed to be the place in which that redemption is anticipated, not the place which rubs our noses in the mud of the problems that arise from the fall.

I've always felt as well or it's just what you said there almost has made me think of an analogy also with what obviously Paul says in Romans where he's talking about the groaning of creation and as in childbirth and there's almost a sense that the creation itself, the difficulty that women have in childbearing is almost a picture of this coming to birth of something new but that which is painful with this process of new birth and new life and new creation. Absolutely and that triple image in Romans 18 to 27 of the world groaning in travel, the church groaning in travel within the world and then the spirit groaning within us, within the world, that is extraordinary that this groaning, this labor pain thing is something which God himself comes to share by the spirit and that is a very profound reflection. In fact I really do think that Romans 8 is one of the deepest and richest passages in the whole Bible.

Well thank you very much and I hope it's been helpful to you Derek and Jessica as you've asked these questions and we never claim to have kind of put a lid on a complete answer to any of these questions. They are there's a great deal of mystery and we just have to live in that tension a great deal of the time in these passages and you know as we try to understand the way that they impact our world today and our understanding but thank you again Tom for taking the time to look at them and to try to do your best to answer them. Thank you and I can recommend if you want more answers on Genesis go back in the podcast archive and you'll find other episodes where we've tackled similar kinds of issues in the past and it's well worth your time doing that but for now thank you very much Tom for being with me.

Thanks Justin, good to be here. Hey I hope you found today's show helpful we'll be back next time with your questions on life beyond earth and the cosmos. Would God need to redeem aliens? We get all kinds of questions on this show.

Is Tom a fan of sci-fi as well? You'll find out that next time and don't forget that if you want to ask a question yourself you can get hold of the link to do so by simply registering for our newsletter. That's the way to get the email address to send your question in. The links are with today's show or go to our big website [premierunbelievable.com](http://premierunbelievable.com). Thanks for being with us and see you next time.

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