

OpenTheo

#42 Ananias and Sapphira and more tricky theological questions

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

How do we reconcile the New Testament account of Ananias and Sapphira being struck dead with the cross-shaped vision of a God of love?

These and other tricky theological questions on original sin, Open Theism and why God considers us 'worthy' of his love are answered by Tom in the latest episode.

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Transcript

[Music] Hi there! Before we begin today's podcast, I want to share an incredibly special resource with you today. If you're like me, life can get pretty hectic pretty quickly. But one thing that helps me slow down is connecting with God in new ways.

And I'd like to share a resource that has really helped me do that. It's called Five Ways to Connect with God. And you can download it for free right now at premierinsight.org/resources. I think you'll find refreshment for your soul.

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[Music] The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

[Music] Hello and welcome along.

I'm Justin Brali, premier's theology and apologetics editor. Bringing you the show that's

brought to you by premier SBCK and NT Wright online. And we've had a bit of a longer break over August than normal, but looking forward to bringing you more from Tom today.

This is the last of several sessions that were recorded pre-lockdown. So now's actually a good time to send your questions in if you've got one for Tom as we line up some new recordings with him in the September and October period. You just need to be registered over at the website of the show to do that.

Ask NT Wright.com. Then you receive the link to the email to ask a question. And you also get entry into our free prize draws. You get the regular newsletter and other cool content.

Now, the newsletter has been on hiatus for a while, but we're planning to start it up again this autumn and bring you all of the updates from the show. Well, today, Tom is tackling tricky theological questions, including what is for me actually one of the toughest New Testament passages to reconcile with the God revealed in Jesus, the story of Ananias and Saphira. Being struck dead after they lied to the Apostles.

So you'll find out how Tom deals with that in this episode of the show. Well, helping Christians, seekers and skeptics find thoughtful answers to big questions around the Bible and faith is what this show is all about. And if you'd like to support that work, we'd love to send you the show ebook 12 answers to questions about the Bible, life and faith, all answered by Tom.

If you'd like to give, then do visit the show page. Again, ask NT Wright.com and click on Give. Well, thanks for being with us today.

Hope you enjoy today's program. So glad to be sitting down once again with Tom Wright, NT Wright, as he's also known under his academic works. And today we're tackling people's tricky theological questions.

I must admit, that's a bit of a capsule phrase for just a bit of a mishmash of questions, though. I wasn't quite sure where to put. So we'll see what Colin and Matthew and Tim and Joshua and Bev will have to say in today's program.

But yeah, I mean, you've led enough tutor groups and seminars and so on to have had some pretty difficult questions thrown at you over the years, not least the ones we're covering in this podcast, Tom. So, I mean, what would you say is some of the trickiest issues that you tend to do? Well, the trickiest issues tend to circulate around the problem of evil in some form or other. Often the problem of perceived evil in somebody's life or circumstances is, you know, why did my husband stroke, brother stroke, niece stroke sister die of cancer when they were such a lovely person doing such wonderful things in the world.

Why did that have to happen? Why didn't God stop it? Or equally, why doesn't God step in and stop what's going on in Syria at the moment or in Iran? Why is there something like the coronavirus? The curious thing is those questions impinge much more in modern Christian thinking than they ever did in ancient Christian thinking. The ancients were quite used to the fact that there were volcanoes and farts and floods and famines and goodness knows what, and they accepted that this world was a bit of a mess and that God was nevertheless at work in it. Yes, the problem.

I'm pretty sure what you're saying. I do see the problem of suffering as a curiously modern problem. And even Western, if I'm honest, because it's not the question, ironically, that many of the people who are most suffering in the world are actually asking.

This is one of the real oddities. It tends to be, you're right, a question that hits comfortable Western people as they look at our sorts of suffering. But yes, there are places where there is real suffering and where there always has been.

Do search back in the archive, actually. We did do a whole episode on the Treston of Suffering. You can look back for that in the Ask until You Write Anything podcast archive.

But these are questions of different sorts, actually, to the particular tricky question. So let's start with Colin in Westminster, South Carolina. It says, "Thank you very much for the podcast, refreshing and helpful.

I have a question about how to interpret the deaths of Ananias and Saphira, because it seems at the cross there's a shift with how the world relates to God in terms of violence. Then all of a sudden you have this happen in Acts and it leaves you wondering what really happened there. I'd appreciate a response.

Thanks for all you are doing." So just to refresh people's mind who are so familiar with the story, but essentially this is a story from Acts, Chapter 5, and the early Christian community in which they're sharing all things in common, and then it's discovered or it's revealed to Peter and the Apostles that this wife and husband Ananias and Saphira have withheld some of the things that are in the past. And then you've held some of the money that was acquired from the selling of a property. And then, well, perhaps you want to read it from Scripture so we know exactly what is said.

I mean, I won't read the whole thing, but you've described it well. It is basically that the early Christians are living as this new community where they are selling their possessions and bringing them on to the Apostle's feet and then saying, "This is who we are and it's now all part of the common purse." And Ananias and Saphira are basically cheating on that. And what happens is that Peter rebukes Ananias sees straight through it.

You're translating here from the Greek, I should say. And he says, "Look, while the thing was still with you, you had the chance to do with it what you wanted, but you have chosen to make this gift and to pretend that it was the whole price, etc." And when Ananias hears Peter, he says, "You have not lied to humans but to God." And when Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear came upon all who heard about you, but there was.

And the young men picked him up and took him out and buried him. And then his wife comes in and Peter says, "Did you sell the property for such and such?" And she says, "Yes, for such and such," which was what Ananias said. And Peter says, "Sorry, the feet of those who buried your husband are coming back and they will carry you out." And she falls over and dies as well.

So it's a very weird story by anyone's standards. And it's one of those things which, if I were writing Acts, would I put that in? Might have just left that well to the whole history. But the odd thing is there's no suggestion that Peter and the others actually execute them.

This is just here is, and it's to do with here's this community in which the living God has come to dwell. And it's like this community is the new temple. That's quite clear from Acts 2 where the spirit comes and over against the existing temple in Jerusalem, which is expecting the divine glory to come there.

It's come on this community. But if you are the temple of the living God, then you don't mess around with this stuff. God is a consuming fire.

And many people who had thought that was an Old Testament idea. And in the New Testament it was all sweetness and light and everyone being nice to each other, etc. Then horrified that the thought of Han and I are just being killed by God.

And as I say, if I was writing Acts, I probably wouldn't have put this story in. But I think that's what it is really about is the dangerous holiness of the life of the community. And the fact that if you can play fast and loose with it, you're actually fracturing the whole question of the presence of God in your midst.

And it seems that the story is told with fear and trembling. We are handling holy things here and we better not mess around. It raises that question then, of course.

And I think this is where Colin is coming from. Wasn't the cross supposed to be a sort of turning point in which God's judgment, if you like, is dealt with there rather than in specific case-by-case basis in this kind of way? But except that then, as we know, there's always that to and fro between what was done on the cross and in the resurrection and how it gets implemented in the church. So that Paul in 1 Corinthians has to rebuke people and has to say, this person who's done X, Y and Z has to be put out of the

community for his own good and the good of the community.

And there is such a thing as church discipline and it's to be taken very seriously. And it's as though this is a bit of a church discipline which God is doing himself. But inevitably, it does sit uncomfortably with a lot of our sense of, well, goodness me, if we were judged that harshly, we would all find ourselves.

Yes, and one might well feel that and I would certainly feel that. At the same time, are we taking seriously what it means to be a community of the people of God in whom the Holy Spirit will come to dwell? And the answer is most of us probably aren't taking that nearly as seriously as we should. And there are several things which happen in Acts right at the beginning which seem to be constitutive and then it sort of moves out from there so that at the beginning they are a community that have shared their property and possessions.

But then that becomes problematic and Paul has to go around and collect a collection of money because they run out of cash in Jerusalem and they're being persecuted. And so the Gentile churches have to contribute to them. So there's always, there's something of ambiguity about that.

I've heard one, I heard this come up in a rather similar podcast to this that Greg Boyd does, but basically he responds to all sorts of listener questions and this specific question came up and a memory might not certainly brilliantly here. But I remember him suggesting a couple of alternative readings of this passage. One of them was, well, there might be a case that when God's, if you like, power rests upon someone, they can use it sort of in ways that aren't necessarily mandated by God, but that they have the power to heal.

They have the power and that there may be a sense in which Peter was allowing that power to go out of him in a way that without God necessarily, if you like, ordaining that these people were killed. Now that's one way he said that there was, you know, and that necessarily isn't Peter using his power in the right way. Another thought he had was what if actually rather than God judging these people and doing the killing, it's Satan, it's the power of evil that has been let into their lives.

And once it's revealed suddenly, you know, that's the, and so it's not true of God judges them as their own sin to catch us up with the number and Satan as it were. I prefer that second explanation to the first one, right? But I think ultimately that too is a way of talking about the holiness of God in the Satan in the Old Testament. Is God Satan, is God's direct republican prosecutions as it were, as in the beginning of the book of Job? Now, there is a rich and dark mystery there which I don't pretend to understand, but I think in all sorts of ways, when humans do sin and here it's the lie which is to do with the money, etc.

It may be a way of invoking an idol which then is allowed to do its worst to them. You could say it like that. But the problem remains, you know, if I was taking a church service and this came up in the electionary and especially if there were lots of guests there who weren't used to coming to church, it's not the one you necessarily choose for guests Sunday.

No, no, exactly, exactly, especially not for guests to give it Sunday. There you go. We can't claim to know exactly to interpret them all, but do appreciate the question, Colin.

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. Okay, something different.

Now Matthew in Las Vegas wants to know, are we worthy of God's love? I'm currently part of a Baptist church and there's a lot of talk about humans being unworthy of God's love. I believe the seriousness of sin and God's aversion or anger towards it, but does that necessarily make us unworthy? If we are unworthy, then why would Jesus choose to die for it? Well, from one point of view, of course, at the various centre of Paul's gospel message, you have Romans 5 verses 6 following is that while we were still sinners, the Messiah died for us. And while we were, yes, precisely unworthy and Paul says it again and again.

It's quite a dramatic passage. When we were weak at the right time, he died for the ungodly. One was guess he died for a righteous man.

For a good man, you might dare to die, but God commences love for us in that while we were still sinners, the Messiah died for us. And then for if while we were enemies, we reconciled to God through the death of his son, much more being reconciled shall we be saved. So Paul really rubs your noses in the fact that it's not just that we were unworthy as though if we'd made it to this grade, then, oh yes, I'll die for you.

But sadly, we're a bit below that. It's totally off the radar altogether. But there's something deeper going on here.

And that is that love and worthiness don't sit well together. You know, when I say to one of my children or grandchildren that I love you, this in all sorts of ways has nothing to do with it, whether they're worthy or not. This is my child and I love her.

I love him and my grandchild. And ideally, it's like that between spouses as well. Obviously marriage is always a challenge and it's to be worked out.

And sometimes spouses do things which show that they really don't deserve one another's love. And then if the love can, it should reach beyond that anyway. So the idea that you only love people who deserve it is that actually love.

I suspect somewhere that Matthew's question is coming from, there might be where you get into some church traditions, a real emphasis on our depravity, that we're all

miserable sinners. Well, God really sort of relented in order to come and save us. But I don't think it's relenting.

It's that all that we know about God, especially as revealed in Jesus himself, which is how we really know about God, is that God is the God of generous love, of overflowing, radical, wild love. The Genesis story is a story about God doing this lavish, extraordinary creation. And that when human sin, what this calls forth from God is not an, oh, well, I suppose I've got to come and clean up this mess, but is a further outflowing of radical, generous, gracious, rescuing love.

That's what God delights to do, even though this will now take God's own second self to die on a cross. So I think we need to go back again and again to this sense of the radical, generous love of God. And that doesn't mean at all that we reduce the emphasis on just how sinful we are, because we are.

And we, even those of us who are redeemed in Christ and indwelt by the Spirit, we are still simple in all sorts of ways and we'll be until we die. And that's why we say day by day, forgive us our trespasses, and it's why day by day we come humbly with open hands to receive God's love afresh. So that I think an over emphasis on unworthiness can mean that you end up just being beaten up at all.

I'm so terrible. Whereas I want to balance that by saying you are a human being made in the image of God. Stand up and take your place as somebody whose task is to reflect God into the world and reflect the world back to God.

And you don't deserve that either. But guess what? It's your vocation. And by the Spirit, you're probably going to do it.

And we as a community are here to help you and to celebrate you doing that. So yes, of course we're all unworthy. That's the joke.

But let's get on and do it. So that's a different sort of embracing of unworthiness to what one sometimes finds. I hope you're enjoying today's show and the videos that we make available on the website.

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AskNTRight.com and click on Give. A related question from Tim Inahayo here who says, are we born with a sin nature? Or are we capable of not sinning? Paul states that we do have a sin nature in passages like Roman 7 and Ephesians 2. But I understand this idea wasn't and isn't a Jewish idea at all.

Are we misunderstanding Paul? I suppose that brings us up to some of the original sin. Original sin. Yeah.

So what did Orton sin and others do with this idea? I'm not quite sure what Tim Inahayo means by the phrase a sin nature. What is the word nature doing in that phrase? Well, I think it is a phrase you hear banded around in church and theological circles that we have a fleshly nature or a sin nature. Oh, I see, yes.

I think that might be the kind of... Yes, that's one English translation of one of Paul's phrases, perhaps, the fleshly nature is a way of translating sarks, which is just flesh. I assume that's what he meant by that, that we have... Maybe. We're born with this natural propensity to sin, to go wrong.

And then he asked, well, are we capable of not sinning? Yes, yes. And is this actually a Jewish idea or not? Yeah, yeah. I get that.

I get that. I think I'm worried about the word nature because it's almost ontologizing this idea of a nature that I've got, this nature. Okay.

And it's not quite... that is how some translations do it. I accept that. But it doesn't quite reflect the way that Paul is talking about being in the flesh or being in the spirit or whatever.

So, putting that to one side, I want to say that he's quite right that in the earlier Jewish world, the later Christian idea of original sin just doesn't seem to be there. One of the interesting things about Jewish traditions on what human beings are is that there's very little about Adam, about Adam and Eve. There are some later traditions about Adam and Eve, but it's not a major theme.

If you look through the Old Testament, there are one or two fleeting hints and references, but nothing like what you would expect from a traditional Christian theology. It says there it is. Adam and Eve, they sinned.

Everything goes wrong. Now, here's the thing. Two things happen in the first century, which cause both the early Christians and the Jews at the end of the first century to say, "Oh, my goodness, the problem was worse than we thought." Take the Jewish one first.

The destruction of the Temple in AD 70 precipitates a writer who we know by the uncomfortable name of For Ezra to write an extraordinary book lamenting what's just happened and then saying, "Oh, Adam, it was all your fault." And that's, I think, a noven.

That's a new thing within the Jewish tradition. In other words, we thought we were the people of God.

We thought if we kept the law, everything will be okay. We were given this new temple after the exile, so now we're back and it's all going to be lovely. And other omens have destroyed it again.

And so there's a sense of this has rocked us back to the place where we say the problem was far more radical than we'd imagined. And then you're left with the question, "How are you going to redeem this?" And then there is a picture of the Messiah towards the end of For Ezra who will come eventually and do the thing that has been done. The crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, seen by Paul as the crucifixion of Israel's Messiah, said to Paul, "The problem was far worse than you'd imagined." And so Paul's view of sin is basically an earlier Jewish view of general human, folly and sin, but rather unfocused, brought into sudden focus by the fact that if that's what God's Messiah had to do, then the problem must be much worse than we'd imagined.

That's why in Romans 1, 18, the little Greek word "ga" comes for the righteousness of God is revealed through faith, for faith, as it is written, the one whose righteous shall live by faith. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness. In other words, in the gospel we see at last just how bad the problem was.

It was there already, but now it's been unveiled in all its horror. What's actually happened? So then Paul would say that all humans, including Jewish humans, in other words, having the Torah doesn't exempt you from this, all humans are sinners, all sinned and came short of the glory of God, which many have seen, Romans 3, 23, as an allusion to the Adam story, that something went categorically wrong. The problem then is that from Augustine onwards, this was turned into a kind of a theory about how sin is transmitted, which Augustine all too readily associated with the acts of sexual intercourse, as though that somehow transmits sin.

And so sex became particularly sinful because it did that. I'm not an Augustine specialist and I may be misrepresenting him, but that's certainly how many have understood that and reinterpreted it. And I think Paul would say no, from the beginning a twist has come into the human world where forces of evil have been unleashed and humans have worshipped idols which have resulted in their humanness and what they're supposed to be doing in the world going wrong.

Without having any great big theories about how precisely that works out, and then again looking back from the cross we can see enough to know that that's what God was dealing with. And so I suppose in summary, when he asked are we born with a signature, however we understand that, some sort of, I mean would you be willing to say yes, we are born with a propensity to go away? Well, saying propensity would imply with Pelagius and people that we're liable to do that, but we might escape if we tried hard enough.

And I'd say it's much worse than that.

If you have to choose in Augustine and Pelagius you have to choose Augustine, but not with all the theories about how that's transmitted. Given that if we do say Jesus was the one person who as it were was exempt in this sense was sinless without sin, is there any sense in the kind of, I think partly Augustine's ideas were based on the fact that Jesus came via a virgin birth therefore this sin nature was not transmitted to Jesus? That's part where it's all come out of. Which then produces the second order thing about theory is about Mary and how she was conceived etc.

Which I think shows that that was the wrong way to go down. Though I understand why and all that. Yes, I think our problem then comes with the fact that some of the strongest biblical language about sin has to do with the human heart and we don't know quite how much of that's a metaphor and how much of it is almost literally physically true that our hearts and our brains.

And it's not just concern for yourself because there is a proper self concern. You can't love your neighbor as yourself unless you love yourself in an appropriate way. First is logically first as it were.

But that the human heart now seems to be a volcano out of which there come all kinds of imaginings of evil and actual evil thoughts and intentions. And I think I want to say reading between the lines of some of the Old Testament material on this that from the beginning when humans rebel against God and obey the voice of the serpent whatever that means. There is a sense of humans having the power and the responsibility to unleash this wickedness upon the world by worshipping that which is only part of creation as if it were God and therefore by giving to that part of creation a power over us which it shouldn't have had.

And then because that power then promises us you will be like God no good and evil or whatever. We say yes please and it becomes a habituated thing which becomes habituated into human race. I'd rather talk about habits and indeed inherited habits than about a nature transmitted in the Augustinian fashion.

Well thank goodness thank Christ we have Christ who obviously stands and allows us to be free at some level even though we'll never be fully free if you like from the effects of sin that we can nevertheless have freedom in that way. Somebody what was it just looking at all these questions are we capable of not sinning? Yes. I think as Christians we are capable of not sinning as Christians we have the option to look at a temptation and say no to it.

Sure. And as Christians we have the option of looking at a vocation something which God wants us to do and actually doing it. And I think there is a danger that when Christians are very much aware of their own sin and of the fact that we are justified by grace

through faith alone etc.

that we forget all those biblical passages which say that we can actually please God. God is not a hard taskmaster for whom we might just about attain a pass mark but basically we're pretty rubbish. God is a loving father who wants his children to flourish and takes as much delight in watching us do even the small steps what we're supposed to do.

As I do watching a grandchild play a musical instrument even if some of it comes out a bit squeaky or odd. I'm just thrilled that they're doing it and God's like that with us. Yeah.

Okay another huge theological issue to try and do in five minutes. Joshua in Denver Colorado says do you think that open theism is a reasonable and defensible way to think about God's knowledge in the world? I feel like it solves more problems than it creates with respect to human suffering our free will and our purpose to existence. And just for those who aren't familiar with exactly what that might be open theism is a reasonably controversial kind of view of God's sovereignty whereby God doesn't necessarily know the future.

The future is in that sense open and it has well-known advocates someone I mentioned already Greg Boyd and others. And is obviously in sharp contra distinction to a sort of Calvinist view in which everything is determined by God and maybe an Armenian sort of perspective sits somewhere in the middle. How exactly we're never quite sure but you know there's a sort of but open theism certainly has been gaining ground certain people really feeling this this helps that it gives it sort of a genuine freedom to the created order that God doesn't have to if you like micro manage everything and can let things take their course but nevertheless still engages with that creation in bringing about his ultimate purposes.

Yes, yes, like many of the great theological questions I tend to think that the positions which have been staked out have been argued quite thoroughly and they would none of them have got there unless they had something to say. So I want to retain with Paul the sense that we absolutely assuredly know that God will redeem the whole creation because he will do it because he's promised in Christ and by the spirit to do it. The creation will be set free from its bondage to decay.

Does that mean that creation is somehow mechanically going that way with God as you say micro manage? No, I don't think it means that at all. It means that we do know where the end is where the end is going to be even though we don't have a very good detailed picture of what that will look like but the great promises of ultimate fulfillment and reconciliation the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. That is not in doubt and there might be some forms of open theism.

I don't know if any of us actually argue this which would make it so free that God's just

waiting to see, oh well let's see how it works out and if it all goes horribly wrong, well tough. I think no, the way God's freedom is exercised seems to be through a gentle wise steering of things but with all sorts of human engagement and interaction. I'm thinking of, you know, there's lovely moments in scripture, one of my favorite moments in the Old Testament is the book of Esther where Haman has got this plot to kill all the Jews in Suze of the capital and all over the place.

And Esther gets as many Jews as she can to fast and pray and fast and pray and the next line it just says laconically that night the king could not sleep. And he called for the books to be brought and they read him the story of the last few years of his reign and there was Mordecai did something really important he rescued he saved my life. What's been done to on a Mordecai because of this.

Well, I think as far as you. Well, okay, let's on and and suddenly the whole stuff and that night the king could not sleep. It's interesting because in the Greek translation the Septuagint couldn't stand the kind of reticence of that and it says that night God took away the king's sleep.

No, it's just it's kind of that night the king could not sleep. Well, isn't that interesting. They were fasting and praying.

And here's the thing. When God makes the world in Genesis 1, God makes trees and animals who have their seed within them. In other words, God says be fruitful and multiply.

Get on with it. Do it. I have given you the capacity to do your own thing.

Now, plants and animals are going to do this even better if the humans are looking after them. But the humans themselves are told be fruitful and multiply. Do your own thing.

Now, often that takes the form of people who want to have children and can't and so they have to pray and wait and wait and finally like Abraham and Sarah. After the right time they have a child and Rachel, Jacob's younger wife, she is cross because God hasn't given her a child. And finally she has Joseph and then eventually Benjamin.

And so it's as though there's a constant to and fro with God saying over to you, get on, do it. You know what you're supposed to be doing. Because God is the letting be God and it's something deeply trinitarian that God makes humans in his own image against the day when he will himself become a character in his own story by becoming human.

And therefore the humans must be free, responsible people in order that when God comes to develop in our midst, he will do what he does freely and responsibly. And that's an it feels an amazing risk as it were and in a sense it is. And is that the bit of open theme and where you can see the point they're getting at which is God allows us an amount of freedom of risk.

Yes, yes. But whether you go all the way with the consequence. Because it's like musical improvisation or indeed artistic improvisation, you know, an artist who flings upon a paint at the canvas and stands back and says, "Now, guess what? Actually, yeah, just imagine that." And then it's emerging there and then works with it and then maybe you get somebody else to do another one and now let's see where we go.

But musical improvisation, if you've ever played jazz, there is an amazing freedom within a structure which is going to a particular place. We all know it's going there. But how we get there involves a lot of listening to one another and of paying attention to the overall intent.

And I think the danger with this whole debate is that it tends to be conducted in terms of a mechanistic model where either God is the CEO who has all the buttons on his desk or he doesn't do anything at all. And it's much richer than that. It's much more like a complicated family all trying to decide how to have a holiday together or how to sing in close harmony together or whatever.

And they've all got ideas. But somebody has to take charge, actually, I suggest we do. And something emerges in the end.

Something emerges in the end, yes. Yes, yes. Final question.

And it goes to Bev in Connecticut. Thanks for listening, Bev. I think this is a really kind of practical question and one that comes up whenever you see a, I don't know, a Bible verse on a car bumper sticker or magnetized on someone's fridge.

But Bev says every Christian goes through difficult times. And at those times we turn to the promises of the Bible for strength and encouragement. And other Christians often cite a range of scriptural promises to encourage us.

So here are my questions. How can we know which promises in scripture are applicable for all time and which were localized to the particular circumstances of the people being addressed at that time? I'm thinking of many of the promises, for instance, to Israel in the Old Testament. Additionally, which promises really must be considered in concert with other scriptures in order to understand the requirements for a promise to be fulfilled.

As an example, I'm thinking of if you ask anything in my name, John 14:14, and if you abide in me, John 15:7. And finally, when is something written as though it's a promise, for instance, many statements in the Psalms, when it might just be a man pouring out his own heart to the Lord. Example, I'm thinking of Psalm 9:1, 9:16.

And then just for some context, Bev adds, we've had a very difficult time over the last 12 years financially with betrayals and unjust court proceedings. It's important to know the answer to this question because the answer will speak to what it is about our covenant

with God that we put our trust in and therefore to his very nature. I've followed the Lord for 60 years with my whole heart, always will.

I've submitted this question several times over the last two years or so in different opportunities long to have addressed. I don't know if you're talking about having submitted it before to the podcast, but maybe to other people who you thought might be able to help Bev. Anyway, you say you're grateful for Tom if he can help us to understand.

Oh, my, oh, my, Bev, I want to put your question in context of an ongoing situation that I'm very much aware of. I have a friend who is pastor of a church in Tehran in Iran, very difficult being a Christian in Iran at the best of times. It's particularly difficult when for various reasons the Western world, particularly America has imposed sanctions on Iran.

And right now, as I'm speaking today, as we're recording this, the coronavirus has taken hold and the hospital where people are being isolated is right up the road from where this friend of mine and his family are living. And his wife and child are basically being confined to the house just in case, and he's trying to organize some online or telephone to Bible studies, et cetera, to keep his congregation praying together. And, you know, that puts every problem that I currently face in a very different perspective.

And he's saying, Tom, please pray for him with us, which I am doing and will do. And I say, how do all these promises, which I so easily take in terms of my comfortable Western lifestyle? How do they apply to this dear brother who is living an amazingly self sacrificial and devoted life as a pastor in a really, really, multiple tough situation? So I want to say, none of the great promises in Scripture automatically mean that if we're being good Christians, we will sail through life without having any problems or sudden deaths in the family or whatever it may be. If we look at John's gospel, the place where those two promises are quoted in John 14 and John 15, Jesus also says, in the world you will have trouble but cheer up because I've overcome the world.

And in other words, if you say, ask for whatever you will and it will be done for you, this presumably doesn't mean, may I just have a peaceful life, plenty to eat and drink and die in my bed with my children around me. You know, wouldn't that be nice? And maybe please God, that will happen to many of us. But that's not guaranteed.

The ultimate guarantees are twofold. One, those many, many promises to Israel in the Old Testament. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1, all the promises of God find their yes in Him.

That is in Jesus' Messiah. And that is a kind of a rushing together, like a great wide river, suddenly going through a great gap in the rock, very turbulent and very vivid, but all of that is concentrated there. And until we learn to read the story of Jesus and the Gospels as the place where all that came rushing together, we're missing the point.

But then having said that, it comes out the other side as it were and says, now, this great river is irrigating the whole world. And within that, we who are the carriers of the Jesus' life by the Spirit, we can claim those promises, but always with that strange, gethseman-like sense of, if it's your will, do I have to do this? And then I think of Paul in 2 Corinthians, and I've been spending some time in 2 Corinthians recently, and Paul believed passionately that he could ask God for anything and everything. But Paul still goes through shipwrecks and meetings and stonings and all sorts of things.

And he would know exactly what my pastor friend in Tehran was going through right now. And so all the difficulties that we have with injustice, global injustice and personal injustice, we're not told that this won't happen. We're told that God will be with us through it, and that God is the God who will do justice eventually.

But often, many, many Christians who have been martyred and so on or have suffered grievously in this life will have to wait for the new creation for things finally to be done. Paul says in Romans 12, "Don't revenge yourselves, leave it up to God, that's God's business. If wrong has been done, sometimes God will put it right in this life, sometimes it'll be later, but we have to trust that it will be." So that's tough.

But I do take those promises very seriously, and I apply those promises in my own prayer life to very specific things for my family, for my children and grandchildren. I will ask, claiming those promises, and sometimes the answer seems to be absolutely yes, here you are. And other times the answer is, let's just wait and see, shall we? Because it's always given in the context of people in exile, people who are, and so God is speaking not just to some individual about "I'm going to sort you out," but it's sort of saying in the picture of the people of God.

And is there a danger sometimes of cherry picking verses of the person? I think there'd be probably even more danger in holding back from that because you were worried about it as it were, in that I think in the mercy of God, all sorts of passages from Scripture can be used by the Spirit to touch people's hearts and to give them back hope. And I know many, many people working as a pastor and as a friend who I've known who will say, "God really spoke to me through this verse, and I know that wasn't what that originally meant, but that day that was what I needed to hear, and it helped me around that corner." And I think God is not proud in that sense. He doesn't say, "Oh, you haven't read all the comments you say, I don't know what that first means." So I do think we have a response, we teach us have a responsibility to suss out the context and to try to be sure of appropriate application, but things still leap off the page.

But the great promises are, all the promises God find their yes in Christ and ultimately the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea, and we are living often uneasily between those two. I hope that's been of some help, both pastorally and theologically for you, Bev. I've taken up too much of your time

already, Tom.

So thank you so much. Thanks for getting through all of those questions. And we look forward to another session in the future.

For now, I'll love you and leave you, and until next time, thank you very much for being on the podcast. Thank you. Great to be with you as always.

Well, thanks for being with us on today's show. Hope you enjoyed it, and we'll be back with more from Tom next time. As ever, if you want more from the show or indeed want to register to ask a question yourself, go to AskNTRight.com. And if you feel able to support the show financially and help bring Tom's thought and theology to many more people, we'd love to send you the exclusive show, e-book, 12 Answers to Questions about the Bible, Life and Faith.

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