

# OpenTheo

## #1 Qs on Heaven, the Kingdom of God and the return of Christ

November 13, 2018



### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

In the first full episode of the show, Tom Wright answers listener questions on how to teach children about new creation, where our loved ones go after they die, and responds to a critique from William Lane Craig.

#### BONUS CONTENT:

To enter the draw for a copy of 'Paul: A Biography' and to receive the bonus video of Tom responding to a question about The Rapture sign up at [www.askntwright.com](http://www.askntwright.com)

## Transcript

[Music] Premier Podcast.

[Music] The Ask Nty Anything podcast.

[Music] Hello and welcome to the brand new Ask Nty Right Anything podcast where I sit down with leading New Testament scholar Tom Wright and ask your questions.

This is a show brought to you by Premier in partnership with SBCK and Nty Right online. Tom Wright is research professor of New Testament and early Christianity at the University of St Andrews, a celebrated author and theologian too. And I'm Justin Bralley, theology and apologetics editor for Premier and the person who has the privilege of getting to sit down with Tom on a regular basis to ask your questions.

I hope you enjoy today's program. But we'd love more people to discover this new podcast. So do please rate and review us on iTunes or wherever you get your podcast from and do let others know about the show.

We'd really appreciate that. If you'd like more episodes, updates or want to ask a question yourself, then simply go online and register at [askntright.com](http://askntright.com). Well today Tom will be tackling questions on heaven, the kingdom come, and end times or eschatology

to give it. It's theological title.

If you register now, you'll actually receive a bonus answer that you won't find on today's podcast. As Tom answers Rick in a Hayo's question, how do you view the rapture? And to celebrate the launch of the podcast, we're also giving away three copies of Tom Wright's acclaimed book, Paul a Biography, to podcast listeners exclusively. Again, sign up at [askntright.com](http://askntright.com) before the end of December to be entered automatically into that draw for those three copies of Paul a Biography.

And indeed to get that bonus content as well, Tom answering Rick's question, how do you view the rapture? Plus all the other goodies that you'll get if you subscribe to the newsletter. Again, [askntright.com](http://askntright.com). Let's get into today's show. Tom Wright, welcome to your very own podcast.

Thank you very much, it's a little scary, but it's good to be with you. I'm so excited and when I announced this a few weeks ago, people were so excited and enthusiastic about it. I was myself overwhelmed by the response.

So I know there's a lot of people who'll be standing by ready to download and listen and watch what we're doing today. So thank you so much firstly for agreeing to come in and spend some time. We've got pastries, we've got coffee, we've got breakfast and I'm really looking forward to just talking theology and asking questions.

You've been writing more books than I've had hot dinners, I think. One of your most recent was on the subject of the cross, the atonement, but of course, perhaps your most well-known book is surprised by hope. Yes, I get more letters, emails, messages, people stopping me after meetings to say that book has really helped me on that book than anything else I've written.

And I didn't know that was going to happen when I wrote it, but it's been exciting to see the reaction. We're going to be talking about that today because we're aiming to theme each of these podcasts as we go along on a particular subject. We've had so many questions in and so inevitably I've had to choose just a handful of them, but we do read all of the questions and if you do keep sending them in, there's always a chance it'll be asked and answered on the show.

So we're going to start though on today's one. Looking at heaven, the kingdom come, eschatology, those are the kinds of issues that obviously you wrote about with surprised by hope. And there will be, for those who managed to stay through to the end of these podcasts, a little surprise musical treat as well, are NT Right Unplugged.

So do stick around for that if you can. Why don't we dive in and get going with some questions? That's what we're here for. Okay, I may be mispronouncing this person's name, but I think it's Josie Arn in Milo.

And Josie Arn asks, how do we explain to ordinary people about the resurrection if they've been taught all their lives that to be saved is going to heaven. That's your soul floats off when you die. And that the soul is a kind of spiritual substance more important than the body needs to be saved.

And all the beliefs that come with that about the material world, etc. And this is sort of getting to the heart of what you were talking about. Right, right.

All these questions about how you'd explain to somebody like this, something like that, I would want to preface them by saying it depends entirely on who they are in the context, because I've done a lot of work with a lot of people and conversations go very differently depending on whether it's a young person in a coffee shop, whether it's a worried old person at the back of the church, whatever. So having said that, I think the obvious place to start is with the resurrection of Jesus himself. And very often, Christians have really glossed over the resurrection ironically, as though it's the sort of happy ending after Good Friday, and many Easter services in churches talk about Jesus being raised from the dead.

Therefore, we're going to heaven when we die. But that's not what the four gospels actually say. So I'd like to start on the firm ground of saying, let's actually look at John 20 and 21, at Matthew 28 at Luke 24 at Mark 16, though that's a very short and probably truncated chapter, and say, what are these stories actually about? And they simply aren't about, oh, he's died for our sins so that we can go to heaven.

They are about new creation. I think you see this most clearly in John. And when you look at John 20 and 21 and see how it works in relation to the whole book, the whole gospel of John, right back to the beginning, in the beginning was the word, you see that the great biblical story, which John is collecting together in his story of Jesus, is about the goodness of the original creation and God's intention to rescue and renew it.

As opposed to, oh, creation's a rather shabby old thing, and God's going to chuck it away and take us somewhere else, somewhere which isn't spatiotemporal and physical. And I totally agree that much Western Christianity has got this simply wrong. And I hate saying that because I like to get on with people.

I like to tell them they're wrong. I'd rather find points of agreement. But the thing I say to the students the whole time is if you go back to the first century looking for somebody who taught that we have souls which are in exile from our true home, which is heaven, and that we're looking forward to going back there one day, then there is somebody who says that very clearly.

His name is Plutarch, and he's a pagan priest at the Shrine at Delphi. He's a philosopher. He's a biographer.

He's one of the great intellectuals of the first century. But he's a Platonist. He is in technical terms what you call middle Platonism between early Platonism and the neoplatonism that was going on the fourth and fifth centuries and so on.

And it's quite a straightforward belief and it's what many modern Western Christians imagine is the gospel. So I'd like to start with the resurrection of Jesus, which is the solid ground that as Christians we ought to be prepared to stand on and work out from there. And yet in my view, probably the vast majority of Christians that they do have a sort of dichotomy of the body and the soul being transported to some other version of reality.

Yes they do. And of course this comes particularly poignantly at a funeral when somebody is says, "Where are they now?" I was at a funeral a couple of months ago of a dear person, a 35-year-old godson of mine who died of cancer leaving a widow and two little children. And it was a wonderful Christian funeral.

But I was sad because there was almost nothing about resurrection, which was, to me, bizarre. What do you say then? Because this chimes in very neatly with a question that came in from someone who simply calls themselves Mike, who says, "What you talk about in terms of heaven coming to earth rather than us going to heaven." Feel so right. But my father died a couple of months ago.

Where is he now? Yeah. Well, I would say the first question to say is, is this father, somebody who is a believing and baptized member of the body of Christ? Because then the answer is comparatively easy. If not, then the answer might be harder because we always say that a person's faith is ultimately known to God alone.

And because of all sorts of circumstances, there are many people who actually do have a basic faith, but it isn't overtly expressed, et cetera. So having said that, I mean, I'll take Mike to the funeral that I presided over, which was for my mother, which was four or five months ago. She was a day short of 95 and was ready to go.

Bless her. And we prayed with her. And it was kind of a relief to her.

Finally, it'll last to be out of her tiredness and so on. And so we celebrated the fact that one day God will make his new world and raise all his people from the dead, including mum, and that we are happy to leave her at the moment safe with Jesus. Paul says in Philippians 1, "My desire is to depart and be with the Messiah, which is far better." Now, being with the Messiah doesn't tell you kind of where it just it focuses on who actually.

The Jesus is looking after his people. And here's the strange thing. And I don't think there's been enough theological work done on this.

In Revelation 6, it talks about the souls under the altar who are saying how long, oh Lord, how long, they're waiting for resurrection. In John 14, Jesus says, I'm going to prepare a place for you. And then I'll come again and take you to myself.

But the word for mansion or room or dwelling or whatever is a word that you would use in Greek, not for a place you'd go and live forever, but for somewhere you would stay and rest before continuing your journey. The Greek word is "monne" and if you look it up in the dictionary, that's what it means, a wayside inn or something like that. It's a blissful place.

In Luke 23, Jesus says to the brigand crucified next to him, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Now, paradise again is rather like C.S. Lewis's "The Wood Between the Worlds." It's the blissful, lovely place where you're waiting before proceeding to the final destination. But do you think that that final destination essentially is a sort of reunion with the physical insides? Absolutely, yes. Very emphatically, Paul says in Ephesians 1, God's desire is to sum up all things in heaven and on earth in the Messiah.

And the whole point is new creation. But actually this goes back to a reading of Genesis. Genesis is the creation of a heaven plus earth reality.

Now, in the ancient world, a heaven plus earth reality is a temple. That's what temples are. Many Old Testament scholars have said, Genesis 1 is describing the creation of a temple.

And guess what? It's got an image in it as a temple should so that you know who the God is and so that the influence of the God may be felt in the world. When you read Genesis 1 like that, all sorts of things go click, click, click. But then when you read John 20, Revelation 21, etc., you realize this is where that whole story was going.

Heaven and earth together not separated. So sort of in conclusion to Mike's question, in terms of where is his father now? If I believe in Christ, we know he is with Christ. So we can't say exactly what that state of existence is.

It's very difficult to say too precisely. It's almost as though there's a kind of divine conspiracy of silence at that point because historically many different cultures have obsessed about trying to get in touch with the dead or whatever. And we are simply told again and again in Scripture, no, they're okay.

Don't worry about them. Don't try and contact them. Trust God.

But in terms of the popular image, some people have of a well-armed anti-mortal looking down at me now from heaven. Not a helpful image. So different Christian traditions have wondered about whether the saints, for instance, whether anti-mortal is a saint or not, we'll leave that open at the moment, whether the saints do have a role in sharing in the intercession of Christ for his people on earth, were told that Jesus is himself interceding for us, Paul says in Romans 8, and some people have seen those who are in Christ sharing that intercession.

In the Greek Orthodox tradition, we pray for the saints and they pray for us. The fact that

there's no consensus among Christians on that, I think is quite important. But here's the thing.

If we believe that the Holy Spirit has indwelt us in the present time, and if we don't believe that, then we're lacking something basic about being Christian, then when we die, I think it's appropriate to say that the Holy Spirit has in some way been, how to say this, affected, shaped by who we have become, just as we are shaped by the Spirit. So every bit of genuine Christian discipleship in us, uniquely in us, has also shaped who the Spirit now is, so that the Spirit has its worries remembering us, holding our members together against the day when the Spirit will then raise us from the dead. That's something to be explored.

Here's a question from Catherine Bentley. Asks after reading "surprised by hope" and noticing how children are taught, well, sort of, since most of the adults don't know it themselves, about heaven, death, resurrection, and so on at church. I wonder if you can give tips how to address the problem of children referring to heaven as a place in the sky, or as a synonym for paradise, or a place where God lives after the dead as a five-year-old told me yesterday at Sunday School.

Any tips on how to get the message across to children would be greatly appreciated. If we don't get our teaching right with them, we mustn't be surprised when we get growing up Christians who muddle everything up. Absolutely, I totally agree.

It seems to me we have tended to concentrate on the spatial thing of going up to heaven or whatever, or him talking about way beyond the blue. Jesus going to his home above the sky and stuff like that, that's really not helpful. Heaven in the Bible is sometimes spoken of like that because the Hebrew Shammim does duty for the sky and God's space.

But actually when you then look at what the Bible says about God's space, it isn't up above the sky. Solomon says, "Heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you how much less this house." Nevertheless, heaven and earth somehow do meet in the temple, and then in the gospels, Jesus himself becomes the temple and in the epistles, the Holy Spirit constitutes the church as the temple. And each time, that means we are at the dangerous overlap of heaven and earth.

So getting away from that spatial upstairs downstairs thing is helpful, but also the time question because people don't realize when they're looking ahead that we are promised that world history as we know it will have an extraordinary day new more in which, as Paul says in Romans 8, the creation itself will be set free from its slavery to decay in order to inherit the freedom which comes when God's children are glorified. So it's not just up then, it's way out in front of us. And here's the thing, one of my students a few years ago said that trying to explain this to his little daughter, this is the question we've been asked, he was reading Revelation 21 and said to her, "Soon or later, God will make

a time when there will be no more tears." And he said, "That really resonated.

A five-year-old child knows about things that cause you to cry." And he said that thereafter his daughter would say, "Daddy, when we get to the no tears place, that's really good. There will be a no tears place because God himself will wipe away all tears from all eyes." And so the fact that that is going to come and that in the resurrection of Jesus it has already begun. We are on this time-track between the launching of new creation and the completion of new creation.

And then within that story, we can talk about heaven and earth coming together. It feels like it's a long-term project though, both for adults and children. It is.

It's a rethink the way we talk about heaven. I mean, there's two major things going on here. On the one hand, from the 18th and 19th century particularly, Western Christianity has become more and more platonic.

You know, this you can observe this historically. And so we have to go back to Scripture again and again. And instead of reading the bits of the Bible that seems to support this platonic vision, we have to talk about creation.

It's the first article of the Creed. God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. He didn't make junk and he's going to rescue and renew it.

That's basic. But then at the same time, while we're doing that, we have quite different stories from our secular culture that either say it's all rubbish or give us wild and wacky ideas. And so as a Christian as a biblical theologian, we're fighting on two fronts against Christian misunderstanding and against the wide misunderstandings that are out there in the world.

Well, I hope you're enjoying our inaugural first full episode of the show. The Ask Enterite Anything podcast is brought to you by Premier in partnership with SBCK and Enterite Online. And Tom Wright's new book, Paul a Biography, is available now from SBCK, Tom's UK publisher.

It's a compelling reconstruction of the life and thought of St Paul and paint a vivid picture of the Roman world in which he preached his revolutionary message. This is what popular historian Tom Holland says about it. A biography of St Paul by his greatest living interpreter, it is a dream come true.

So do check it out along with Tom's other books at SBCK Publishing.co dot UK. Let's turn to Anders in Stockholm in Sweden who emails in to say, Jesus second coming is something we're all waiting for. But according to William Lane Craig, anti-rights view is quite different.

And I would like some clarification now to set the scene. William Lane Craig is a well-

known Christian philosopher from the USA. I know that he's been working on his own research in atonement and so on.

And obviously looking into your views. Anyway, this is the piece that's quoted by Anders from William Lane Craig saying, anti-right has this very peculiar view that the Son of Man returned in 8070 with the destruction of Jerusalem. Anders is looking for clarification on that quote.

Sadly, I mean, I've known Bill Craig for quite some time and we've argued in public and sometimes we've agreed in public as well as disagreed and that's fine. And yes, he is working on atonement and yes, he disagrees with my view on that. And that's fine too.

This is how we learn from one another hopefully. But he's wrong in terms of saying that I say that in this is Mark 13 and Matthew 24 and Luke 19 and sorry, Luke 21 and so on, that the Son of Man is returning at 8070. The problem comes with the idea of the coming of the Son of Man.

When you read Daniel 7, which is one of the most important biblical texts for the early Christians and for Jesus himself, you have to realize what's going on. And sadly, I may not have made this clear in Jesus the Victory of God, but I had a whole long chapter on this. I thought I had made it clear that the way that Daniel 7 is being read in the first century is not about somebody called the Son of Man coming downwards from heaven to earth, but about this figure, one like a Son of Man coming on the clouds to be seated beside the ancient of days who is God.

So here's the scenario. And actually, there's a kind of a kid's version of it in the previous chapter because in Daniel chapter 6, we have Daniel himself in the Lamb's den. So what is this about? Daniel is a human being.

He's put down into this den surrounded by man-eating monsters. And in the morning, the king comes and looks down into the Lamb's den. "Learn, behold, Daniel is still alive and well, and the lands are still hungry." And the king brings up Daniel out of the den and makes him the second ruler in the kingdom.

That is exactly the same picture that you then have in Daniel 7, where you have this image of the great sea monsters, the monsters coming up out of the deep, which as anyone who knows the Jewish literature of the time knows, these are not literal prophecies about day of the triphids monsters coming up out of the Mediterranean. These are great world empires. They are nations and kingdoms and can be variously interpreted, Babylon, Syria, Greece, Rome, whatever.

But then when the fourth and last one has done its worst, then one like a son of man is brought up to sit beside the ancient days. And there's no question as to what that means in the text itself because it's interpreted twice. There's a short interpretation, then it's an



expanded interpretation.

And it's about, quote, "The people of the saints of the Most High, i.e. the faithful Israelites, will receive the kingdom and will reign forever and ever." In other words, God will vindicate his people and they will be the judges of the world and the monsters will get their comeuppance. And when Paul says in 1st Corinthians that don't you know that we will judge angels and we want to say, no, actually Paul, we didn't know that. Thank you very much.

Tell us more. I think this is the sort of passage he's referring to, that actually this is in Jewish, 2nd-time Jewish thought, this is how the scenario is going to play out. So now cut to Mark 13 when Jesus and his disciples, by the temple and the disciples are saying, wow, this is an amazing building.

And Jesus says, actually guess what? It's all going to come tumbling down. And they say, uh, when, how, what's that about? What's this all going to be? Because the great scenario at the end of Matthew, Mark and Luke is a kind of confrontation between Jesus and the temple and particularly a confrontation between Jesus and the High Priest who represents the current temple regime because in the gospels, Jesus himself is presented as the true temple. So the place isn't big enough for them both to put it crudely.

And so this is all about the temple is going to be destroyed, which will constitute Jesus' visible vindication. Jesus will be raised from the dead. Jesus will then be exalted.

And the sign that he is exalted is that the temple which has opposed him will be destroyed. In order to get that, you need to see how it's then applied in the next chapter when Jesus stands before Kiafas, the High Priest. And Kiafas says, what's this nonsense about destroying and rebuilding the temple? Jesus doesn't answer because there's no way he can explain that to Kiafas.

But then Kiafas goes for the jugular, are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed? And Jesus, there's no easy English translation for you've said it or is it yes or is it the words of yours or whatever? But then comes the crucial thing. You will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven. That does not mean that Kiafas will look out of the window and see Jesus coming downwards on a cloud.

That is a cross-modern, literalistic misinterpretation. In Matthew and in Luke, many people think they are just making Mark a bit more clear here. It says, from now on, you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven.

And then at the end of Matthew's gospel, we're referring back to Daniel 7, all authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. In other words, Matthew and Luke interpreting Mark, and I think it's so in Mark, but with Mark it's very dense and can be

misinterpreted, are quite clear that the Son of Man passage in Daniel 7 refers to Jesus' vindication that the destruction of the temple is a generation later is the ultimate sign that God has vindicated and is vindicating Jesus. And that people have said, "Oh, this means anti-right doesn't believe in the second coming." No, watch my lips.

Of course the second coming is real. That's there all over the New Testament, but these texts are not about the second coming. They are about the vindication of Jesus.

Now, I'm sorry, that's a long answer, but it's really important. But just to recapitulate on that, the AD 70, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and soul, what is the significance of that in terms of what Jesus said and what? The significance of it is that God in Jesus is starting a true temple movement. When you look back from the gospel, the stories of Jesus, you see that actually the temple in Jerusalem was always intended as an advanced signpost of a coming reality.

But if you mistake the signpost for the reality, it becomes an idol. You see this in the speech of Stephen in Acts very clearly and actually all the way through Acts, all the clashes are about temples, whether it's in Athens or Ephesus or Jerusalem. And the question is, where are heaven and earth coming together now? And the church is constituted on the belief, which is dangerous and scary.

This is where heaven and earth coming together. Great first episode. Thank you very much.

Thank you. But yes, believe it or not, our time is up already, I know. But don't worry, we'll be back very soon with episode two of this brand new podcast, the Ask, Anti-Write, Anything podcast.

Send your questions in. If you'd like to ask a question, do register at our website. You can also sign up for news and episodes and all the rest of it.

Askentiright.com. Do please rate and review this podcast wherever you get your podcast from. We'd be delighted to make sure other people know about this brand new podcast. For the moment, I look forward to joining you again very soon, Tom.

Thank you. Thank you for being with us on the first official episode of the Ask, Anti-Write, Anything podcast. You can expect a new episode every two weeks or so on Tuesdays.

That's when they'll be landing. And future editions of the show will cover listener questions on topics such as female leadership, the historical Jesus, biblical inerrancy, Calvinist theology, St Paul, Atonement theology, Mission and Evangelism and much more besides. So do look out for it every two weeks on your podcast feed and sign up to our newsletter at Ask, Anti-Write.com. You can ask questions, receive bonus content, including that exclusive clip of what Tom said in answer to Paul from Ohio's question, "How do you view the rapture?" And of course, that chance to win one of three copies of

Paul, a biography.

So much good stuff coming your way. If you simply sign up at the website, [askentiright.com](http://askentiright.com). Well, a bit of a treat right at the end of the podcast. For those who've stayed around long enough, because we're getting to hear a little bit of anti-write unplugged from time to time on the show, very kind of you to indulge me with this, Tom.

I've asked you to play, you're actually playing my guitar. But what's a guitar between friends? And I've asked you to pull out from the memory banks a few songs you've played over the years because a little known fact, as well as doing the lecturing and speaking, you do occasionally pull out the guitar at maybe the end of an evening on a conference or whatever. So we're going to hear a Bob Dylan classic, I think.

Yes, yes. I actually met this through Peter Paul and Mary, one of their albums from back in the late 60s. They were covering various of the Dylan songs.

And I actually really fell in love with their version of this, which of course, with three voices on, wouldn't it be nice? So feel free to join in if you like. I wouldn't dare. And actually, when my wife and I first met, we were singing together in a folk concert.

And this was a song we sang. Sadly, my wife has refused to sing it to public with me in the last 10 years or so. But it used to be a party piece.

But it's a wonderful song with all kinds of what, as a theologian, I now think of as eschatological imagery, the ship coming in and the new day dawning and God putting everything right. And the ship coming into harbor is a great sign of thought. Well, if there ever was a public theologian, it was Bob Dylan wasn't it? But yes, yes.

Where is today's Bob Dylan? I mean, people, you know, the 60s was a time when serious thinking was being done through this kind of music. And one of Dylan's bootleg tracks was him singing this song, but with a long introduction. Because the last verse is about, like Goliath, they'll be conquered.

And he says, there are lots of Goliath's around today and they need to be conquered as well. Or was that affected the crowd go wild? Because they know he's talking about it. So that's the secret.

Oh, the time will come up when the wind will stop and the breeze will cease to be a breeze in. Like the stillness in the wind before the hurricane begins, the hour that the ship comes in. And the seas will split and the ship will hit and the sand on the shoreline will be shaking and the tide will sound and the waves will pound and the morning will be a break.

In oh, the fishes will laugh as they swim out of the path and the seagulls they'll be smiling and the rocks on the sand they'll proudly stand the hour that the ship comes in.

And the words that are used for to get the ship confused will not be understood as they're spoken for the chains of the sea will have busted in the night and be buried on the bottom of the ocean. Oh, a song will lift as the main sail shifts and the boat drifts on to the shoreline and the sun will respect every face on the deck.

The hour that the ship comes in. And the sands will roll out a carpet of gold for your weary toes to be a touch in. And the ships wise men will remind you once again that the whole wide world is watching.

Oh, the foes will rise with the sleep still in their eyes and they'll jerk from their beds. Think they're dreaming but they'll pinch themselves and squeal and they'll know that it's for real. The hour that the ship comes in and they'll raise their hands saying we'll meet all your demands but we'll shout from the bow your days are numbered and like pharaohs tribes they'll be drowned in the tide like Goliath they'll be conquered.

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It does fly by. Is the right tone the right pitch? Lovely. No, really enjoying that.