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#88 Martin Bashir interviews NT Wright on Paul

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom Wright speaks to Martin Bashir about Paul and the church in Part 2 of an event by SPCK to mark the publication of Paul: A Biography in 2018.

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Transcript

(upbeat 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. So go right now to premierinsight.org/resources and download your copy. That's premierinsight.org/resources.

(upbeat music) - The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

(upbeat music)

(upbeat music) - Hello and welcome along to today's show. It's Justin Briley with you for the program that brings you the thought and theology of Tom Wright. NT Wright, as he's

often known.

I'm Premier Theology and Apologetics Editor. And today's show brought to you in partnership as usual with NT Wright online and SBCK, Tom's UK publisher. If you'd like more from the show, do sign up at askentiright.com. In these last couple of episodes, we've been bringing you some bonus material before we return to our normal Q&A format.

The audio of an event organized by SBCK in 2018 in London to mark the publication of Tom's best-selling book, Paul, a biography. And if you haven't heard as well, something I'd like you to know about, we've launched recently a new online apologetics course from premier unbelievable. It's for individual learning in your own time over four hours of video teaching from some brilliant Christian thinkers like William Lane Craig, Amy O'Ewing, Gary Habermas and John Lennox.

I'm on there too, and together we guide you through key aspects of evidence for the Christian faith. If you've ever got tongue tied or wanted to be able to present someone with some objective evidence for the truth of Christianity, it's a great introduction to that. It's called Confident Christianity.

You can get actually 30% off it until the end of this month of October. So go to premier.org.uk/getconfident. There's a link with today's show too, if you'd like to get hold of that. So thanks for being with us on today's show.

And in this part two of these special programs, Enthi writes six down with broadcaster Martin Bashir to talk through the issues from his lecture on Paul. We're saying that since this was recorded, Martin Bashir has had an interesting and controversial year and stepped back from his role as a religious correspondent for the BBC. But well, that's another story.

For now, here he is in conversation with Tom Wright.

(upbeat music) (audience applauding) - I'm sure it wasn't lost on you that the bells rang throughout your talk and ceased the moment I came, which is an indication of Westminster Abbey's view. This is a remarkable book, Professor Wright.

It's historical and for ecological, sociological, theological. But in addition to you being a professor, you're also a pastor, you referred to that just now, you were a bishop. And so I want to start by asking you about one of the things that you draw out in the book in relation to suffering.

You write this, the visit to Romans with the start of Paul's new life, that of a suffering apostle. God's kingdom is indeed breaking in that new divine rule, but it will mean undergoing suffering. Again, you write the bodily marks of identification that mattered to Paul were not the signs of circumcision, but the marks of Jesus, in other words, the signs

of suffering.

How does the apostle commend the Christian faith in the first century? And how does that compare to things we often hear today in the church where people are promised health and wealth, a triumphalism, a God at your disposal? How does Paul differ? Yeah, that's very interesting. I personally don't usually attend churches that promise things like that, and that's just the might back of the writing. But you know that many people do.

I know that many people do, absolutely. And I mean, we can't get round sayings of Jesus about I came that they might have life and have it more abundantly. You know, that's absolutely comes with.

And when Paul talks about love and joy and peace, that's all true. But when Paul talks about those things, he's either writing from prison or he's writing with the wounds still on him from the last time he was beaten up or stoned or whatever. So there's an odd rich mixture.

I think the crucial thing for Paul is that he really believes that he is living on the cusp of the new creation, that the new creation has broken in, but the old creation not only is rumbling on and it's deadly and it's corrupt and it's decaying, but the old creation resents the new creation breaking in and is doing its best to strike back. And I think that's what Paul thinks was going on in his moment of terrible darkness in Ephesus, which he talks about in "Two Corinthians One." And by the way, I had a letter just last week from a pastor I knew from a previous job who had been reading that book and I hadn't heard from him for some years, but he said that that passage had reduced him to tears because he had just been through a period like that in his pastoral ministry. And he thought, "Oh my goodness, Paul went through this too.

"This is my life," and it was hugely encouraging to him. So that I think the main thing is that Paul is telling people that God's new world is breaking in, it has broken in Jesus, it is breaking in through the power of the Spirit, but if you are on the leading edge of that and if you're committed to following Jesus and living in one of these extraordinary, multivalent, fictive kinship groups, i.e. churches, then stuff is gonna happen. The powers are gonna strike back and sometimes that's apparently rather trivial and sometimes it's very dark and very nasty, but it often involves suffering of one's sort or another.

I was reflecting, I didn't know you were gonna ask me that question, but I was reflecting a couple of days ago for quite a different reason. I have a prayer list, people I pray for every day, some I pray for every week, et cetera. And I went right down a long list and I realized that all these people, I'm old friends, family members, et cetera, I know things about their lives, whether points of darkness and suffering and pain and grief and anxiety, one after another after another.

What we think of as this sort of normal, happy, healthy family actually is very, very rare.

Almost all of us have got sorrows and pains and difficulties and angst here and there. And for Paul, that is multiplied by the fact of being on the leading edge of the new age breaking and he teaches his congregations this is gonna happen.

So he teaches them about suffering, but there's another thing that you draw out in the book. And that is Paul's emphasis on what you call the absolute condemnation of sexual immorality. Now, again, I was reading a lecture by Professor Larry Hottado at Edinburgh University and he writes, "Christianity effectively "irrays the double standard.

"Men were to practice the same kind of sexual discipline "that was expected of women. "The moral quality of the Christian life "for both men and women was to shine in the culture." And yet again, you seem to be suggesting, here's the apostle Paul, commending Christianity. And what are the two bulwarks he says, you're gonna suffer and there's to be no sexual immorality.

- Yeah, yeah. - That's hardly a great marketer, if you look at it. No, and although I think this may be one of the reasons why, as Rodney Stark argues in his book, "The Rise of Christianity," why a lot of women found Christianity very attractive? Because instead of being abused and exploited, this was a new world in which they were valued and cherished and in which men behave themselves, supposedly.

Now, of course, the church had failings and then, and now you see it in first Corinthians, but it's part of the new creation, the idea, and you see this in Mark 10 in Jesus' teaching, the idea that if God is remaking the world, let's get Genesis one and two right this time. And that means, you know, the standards of marriage, which are there in the Jewish world and which are now an innovation in the pagan world. I mean, I forget where it was, some classical writer, some modern writer about the classics I was reading, who said that basically in the ancient pagan world, for a man, Larry's point, you just had as much sex as you could, and the only thing that was stopping you was kind of jealous husbands or whoever, that otherwise, it was open season.

And so for the early church to stand out on this is truly remarkable. The great philosopher and doctor at the end of the second century, Galen, doesn't know much about the Christians, but he knows two things about them, both of which make him think that they're mad, one, they believe in the resurrection of the body, and two, they don't sleep around. Wouldn't it be nice if the church was known for that today? You know, in both cases, this is a valuation of the goodness of creation.

It's a celebration of what it means to be made in the image of God, made with bodies that are to be redeemed and therefore are to be valued, instead of being treated as trivial toys. You were talking earlier about your motivations in writing, and I know I've read before where you've said, the problem has often been 19th century questions with 16th century answers, which I guess is a polite way of dismissing the whole of the Reformation's theology, but we'll come to that in a minute. Not dismissing it, but

renegotiating it.

Right. But for those outside of the church, perhaps Paul's moment on the road to Damascus is the single event in the apostles' life that people know about. I'm talking about completely unchurched individuals.

What happened on the road to Damascus? If we ask Paul that, he would say, Jesus revealed himself to me, and/or I met him, I saw him. For Paul, this wasn't what we would mean by a vision. In other words, Paul is quite clear, this isn't like the subjective visions that other people have.

He differentiates his seeing of Jesus from any subsequent ones. He says, "Last of all," it's a resurrection appearance. It's the risen Lord appearing personally.

And in order to make sense of that, I think Paul would say to us in our late modern world, you need to understand that in God's world, heaven and earth are not far apart. They are made to overlap and interlock. That's very counterintuitive for us because our culture is deeply epicurean with a distant God in a heaven, and we're down here.

But in biblical thought, heaven and earth are made for each other, and Jesus stands at the intersection. And so how did that happen? I've argued in the book, and this isn't original to me. Other people have said this as well, that Paul was praying on the road to... He's a zealous Jew off to do God's business.

So of course you're praying that you will be in a state of holiness while you're doing this terrible work. And one of the ways that devout Jews prayed was to use Ezekiel chapter 1, the whirling wheels of the throne chariot, and then the chariot itself, and then your eyes go up to the figure on the chariot. And I've argued in the book that maybe Paul was doing that, and that when he got to see who was sitting on the divine throne chariot, it was Jesus himself, which is a moment of total fulfilment and total confusion and devastation.

It destroys everything and fulfills everything. Was that in the language of theologians the moment he was converted? I wouldn't put it like that. If I say someone was converted today, the normal assumption would be this person has been an atheist or an agnostic or whatever, and has come to faith, had a spiritual experience.

Paul was a deeply spiritual man, deeply prayerful man, who worshipped the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as the creator God, the God of Israel. Paul never stopped worshipping the creator God, the God of Israel, throughout his life. What happened was that he came to realise that this God he'd always worshipped had acted in and as Jesus, and then he quickly came to realise was active in and through his spirit.

So we have to be very careful in case we give the impression that Paul leaves something called Judaism and embraces something called Christianity. The isms and the itis are a

19th century invention. That's part of our problem.

But the reality is that the apostle stops enforcing Jewish obedience to the law, something he'd done with violence. Yep, yep. But he says... After that experience.

Yeah, this is where we need to subpoena the whole of Galatians chapter three, because that's where he hammers that one out, where he makes the very strong argument that God made promises to Abraham about how he was going to save the whole human race, in principle. I mean, save people of all sorts, if you like. And that the law, the Mosaic Law, was given as a good but temporary dispensation.

And that's a complicated bit of theology, but it's necessary to say the law was good, but its purpose is now fulfilled, and Moses is kind of pointing on. In Romans 8, he says, "What the law couldn't do, God has now done." That's the key. Hi there.

Before we go any further, I want you to know about a very special ebook we're releasing this month, called Critical Race Theory and Christianity. This ebook draws from two unbelievable podcasts with Neil Shenvie, Rasseberry, Owen Strand, and Jermaine Marshall, addressing questions like, "Has so-called woke ideology taken over parts of the church, or is white privilege a problem in the church?" And is Critical Race Theory compatible with the gospel? I'd love for you to have a copy of this powerful ebook as my special thanks to you for your gift to Premier Insight today, the ministry that brings you this podcast each week. You see, all of the conversations, insight, resources, and encouragement that you get from Premier Insight programs, like this one, are only possible because of the support of wonderful friends like you.

Without your generosity, none of this would be possible. So please, go to premierinsight.org/give and make a donation today. That's premierinsight.org/give. And don't forget to download our newest ebook, Critical Race Theory and Christianity, as my special thank you.

You've helpfully taken a song to something that Paul is theologically associated with, perhaps more closely than any other, and that is the doctrine of justification by faith. Towards the end of the book, and I'm quoting you, you pose this question. If the word "pistis" can mean "loyalty" as well as "faith", then might one express Paul's famous doctrine as "justification by loyalty"? I have to confess, that's a new one on me.

Are you suggesting that the individual's justification before God, according to Paul, includes some kind of demonstration of loyalty? I think part of the problem, this is getting technical, so forgive us, but this word "pistis", P-I-S-T-I-S, which we normally translate as faith. As Martin says, means loyalty, trustworthiness, trustfulness, the whole range of things. And I think in Romans itself, we see Paul exploiting those different meanings.

When he says up front, that this is the gospel about Jesus, the son of David, the son of God, raised from the dead, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the nations. That's another Caesar phrase. Caesar wanted obedient loyalty, thank you very much.

Jesus is the Lord who wants obedient loyalty. The danger with that is if you're asking the question of justification in terms of what do I have to do in order that God will be pleased with me, then it sounds as though I have to do something, I have to be loyal instead of just believe. And that's where we need to pan right back and say, "No, that's not what we're talking about." That is where the 16th century, and actually it wasn't their fault, got into a muddle because they were responding to the Middle Ages.

I've often said Luther and Calvin and the others who are among my great heroes were trying desperately to give biblical answers to late medieval questions. That's much better than giving non-biblical answers to late medieval questions. But let's think about what the first century questions were and they weren't the same questions and that's where the slippage could have caused.

But Thomas Cranmer, speaking of this doctrine specifically, writes, "This proposition that we be justified by faith only, freely and without works is spoken in order to take away clearly or merit of our works as being insufficient to deserve our justification at God's hand." - Absolutely, yeah. - Do you embrace that as an assertion of what Paul's saying? - No, I embrace that as an assertion of what had to be said urgently in the middle of the 16th century. And bless Cranmer for saying that because that wasn't where he started but he went to the stake for that and associated doctrines.

But when we pan back and say, that's what needed to be said to ward off the 15th century heresies. What needs to be said by Paul is that God intends to put the whole world right, 0.1. God has dramatically launched and inaugurated this project by raising the crucified Jesus from the dead, 0.2, so that the world has in principle been put right. And God now, through grace, through the gospel, puts human beings right so that they can be part of his putting right project for the world.

- And being part of that project does not require a demonstration by myself of good works of effort already. - It doesn't require it, but as Luther himself would say, if it doesn't issue in that, something is wrong with the initial faith. I mean, that's quite clear.

I mean, some of Luther's early treatises make this extremely clear that faith works through love according to Galatians. And love and faith actually, and Paul are really quite close. They are both about trusting God and living a life shaped by the death of Jesus.

So this is part of a much larger conversation, of course, but I think if you start by saying, how do I get to heaven, do I have to do good works or not? Wrong question, but if you ask that question, the answer is no, you simply believe and trust. God reaches out and

you say, thank you and believe. But if you start by saying-- - And Paul articulates.

- And Paul articulates that. But the works which Paul rules out and which Kharma is echoing there, as in Galatians 3, as in Romans 3, as in Galatians 2 as well, primarily for Paul, these are the works of the law which mark out the Jewish people from their non-Jewish neighbors, circumcision, Sabbath, the food laws, and go into the temple and so on. Paul says, don't have to do that anymore.

That was a good but temporary dispensation. - In terms of today's culture, where some find their Christian face to be less than respected, oftentimes marginalized, people feel that holding to the position of the Christian faith can sometimes be derided and mocked. What does the apostle Paul tell us about holding to the faith in the midst of a demanding culture? - Wow, yeah.

I think his main answer to that question would be that this is what he is trying to model. And sometimes he is modeling it at the heart of a vibrant, loving, happy community that he's helping steer. Often he is modeling it when he's in prison, when he is just saying, I am going to be loyal to Jesus quite literally, even if they kill me.

And the end of Philippians, that fourth chapter of Philippians is perhaps one of the places where, if that was all we'd read, he sounds really quite like some of the stoic moralists. He says, I know how to be a beast, I know how to abound, I can do all things in the one who gives me strength. And there he is, I think, actually upstaging the philosophers who are seeking to have a humanist they can be proud of.

And it's not in himself, it's in the Messiah. And so in the power of the Spirit and in union with the Messiah, he says, I can do all things, panted, you know, my extraordinary. And in that context, just earlier in the same passage, the famous bit, rejoice in the Lord always, et cetera, which is set to music and wonderfully sung here and there.

He says, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is lovely, whatever is good report, any virtue, think about these things. That's a mental discipline. You know, the world is bombarding us to think about all the opposite things, everything that's bad.

My phone just updated itself without my asking it a few days ago. And it's produced a Google feed, which is all sorts of things that I actually don't want to think about and telling me all sorts of stupid things and rather unfortunate things. Why do I need that? I don't know how to get rid of it, actually, if anyone can tell me afterwards, you happily reprogram before me.

But you're Paul saying, make sure that you positively put into your mind the things that are noble and lovely, wherever they are. And that's not just in the confines of the Christian community. That's, you know, go to the art gallery, celebrate human creativity, look at the beauties of the world around you.

And then he says, but whatever you've heard and received and seen in me, that's what you're to do. In other words, there's an embrace of the goodness of God wherever it is. And then there is an embrace of this way of life.

And those somehow are both affirmations of the goodness of God in creation and redemption. I think that's really Philippians 4, it's his best answer to that question. That's a beautiful description.

A final question from me before we go on to some questions that have been submitted. You talked earlier about the fact that if you were in a fight, you'd probably want Paul on your side. If you're in a debate, you probably would.

But at the same time, he'd probably irritate you and annoy you occasionally. If you were to distill the apostle Paul's singular strength, would it be his tenacity, his intellect, his grasp and ability to process the culture, his knowledge of Jewish scripture? What is the singular strength that do you think this man possesses? It would be all of the above, but I think I would go back, ultimately, to his prayer life. That he is a prayer life.

That he's a man clearly who, when he talks about praying constantly, this is what he does. And when I find a passage like 1 Corinthians 8, where he's retooling the Jewish prayer, the Shema, here, oh, Israel, the Lord, I've got the Lord, is one, with Jesus in the middle of it. For us, there is one God, one Lord.

And when he's, you know, there are some Jews who pray that prayer, like some Eastern Orthodox pray the Jesus prayer, with the rhythm of their breathing. Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on me, has sinned. I think it's quite possible that Paul prayed that and similar Jewish, but now Jesus shaped prayers.

As the deep, well, that's what I was talking about when I talked about the plant in harsh winter, when he's faced with that horrible, horrible moment, his prayer doesn't stop, but it has to go down deeper and deeper and deeper. And all the things you mentioned, his intellect, his tenacity, his ferocity with people who, you know, were getting it wrong, whatever, I think they are all rooted in that. That's where his security is.

So it's his prayer life? Well, I want all the rest as well. But I think that's right to the heart of it. Wonderful.

[MUSIC] Thank you for being with us on today's edition of the Ask, Anti-Write Anything podcast. The bonus episode to continue next week as we hear part three of this special evening with Anti-Write and some of the audience questions that were put to Tom. This was all part of the launch of Paul Abbiorgography in London by SBCK.

And don't forget that SBCK, Tom's UK publisher, have some special deals on Tom's books for podcast listeners. The links are in the show notes today, as well as a link to the video of this event. You can find out more about the show as usual at askentiright.com. Make

sure you sign up for giveaways, updates and bonus stuff too.

And just a reminder that you can get hold of our new online apologetics course as well at premier.org.uk/getconfident. There's a link with today's show. And for now, thanks for being with us and see you next time.

[MUSIC] [Silence]