

# OpenTheo

## #136 Talking to kids about New Creation & responding to William Lane Craig

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### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

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 in a replay of an early edition of the show from 2018.

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### Transcript

Ask NT Wright Anything Podcast Hello and welcome to the podcast that brings you the thought and theology of New Testament scholar and former Bishop of Durham Tom Wright. I'm Justin Briely heading up Premier Unbelievable and the show is brought to you in partnership with Tom's UK publisher SBCK and NT Wright online who run his video teaching courses. We're due to be recording some fresh Q&As from you with Tom very soon so now's a good time to be sending in those questions.

You can get your question asked by registering for our newsletter at [premierunbelievable.com](https://premierunbelievable.com), our website, and you'll get the link to ask a question with your first welcome email. Registering also keeps you up to date with all the great stuff coming

from our fledgling apologetics and theology ministry. We've got a whole variety of shows and podcasts and resources now available.

Today on the show we're going back to the very beginning of this podcast which began nearly four years ago. There are some real gems in the back catalogue and today you'll hear the very first set of questions that Tom responded to from November 2018. Aftering, listen to questions on how to teach children about new creation, where our loved ones go after they die, and responding to a critique from well-known philosopher William Lane Craig.

Plus there's a little bonus something to listen out for at the very end of today's podcast. Don't leave early or you'll miss it. I hope you enjoy today's gem from the vaults.

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.

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. 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.

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. I may be mispronouncing this person's name, but I think it's Josie Arn in Milo.

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. 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 us in so 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, creations are 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 as 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 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, yeah. Well, I would say the first question to say 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, that 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 waysidean 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 instance? 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, 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, anti-mort is looking down at me now from heaven.

Yes, yes, yes. Not a helpful image. Different Christian traditions have wondered about whether the saints, for instance, whether anti-mort 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 it 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. "Ask after reading "surprised by hope" and noticing how children are taught well sought off 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 must not be surprised when we get grown-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. And 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 Shummah in 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-trag 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. 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, you can observe this historically. And so we have to go back to the scripture again and again. And instead of reading the bits of the Bible that seem 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.

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, "NT 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, "NT 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'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 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 lands, Dan. 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 lands 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 sort of 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 of 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 1 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, second-temple Jewish thought.

This is how the scenario is going to play out. So now cut to Mark 13 when Jesus and his disciples, they're 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, 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, there's no easy English translation for you've said it or, 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 the 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, 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. 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, that this is where heaven and earth coming together. Great first episode. Thank you very much.

Thank you very much. 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.

Ask, anti-write.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 today's show. Don't go anywhere because we've got something fun coming up for you in just a moment's time.

Next week, we'll be pulling out another treasure from the archive of past shows before we return to some fresh questions with Tom. By the way, you can get your question in by registering for our newsletter at [premierunbelievable.com](http://premierunbelievable.com). Doing that also gets you updates out of free ebook on the case for God. Again, that's [premierunbelievable.com](http://premierunbelievable.com). Do check out all our other podcasts and videos while you're there too.

For now, thanks for being with us this week. And here's that special something I promised. 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, they are 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 begin. Oh, the fishes will laugh as they swim out of the bath 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 a number. And like pharaohs

tribes they'll be drowned in the tide like the life they'll be conquered.