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#108 What if I'm not really saved?

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Can we lose our salvation? What if I don't feel worthy to be a disciple of Jesus? Could I think that I'm saved, but not be? Like those that Jesus says 'depart from me' in Matt 7:21-23? Justin asks the questions and NT Wright responds.

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Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast Hello, it's Justin Brierley, back with the podcast that brings you the thought and theology of Tom Wright, where you get to ask the questions. And in partnership with NT Wright Online, SBCK-Tom's UK Publisher and Premier Unbelievable.com, please visit www.unbelievable.com/SBCK-Tom Wright Today, we're asking, what these sorts of questions come up quite frequently around salvation can we lose our salvation? What if I don't feel worthy to be a disciple of Jesus? Could I think that I'm saved, but not be what about those people that Jesus says? Depart from me in Matthew 7, even though they did wonders in his name. So Tom will be responding to all those kinds of issues on today's show.

Thanks, by the way, to all those who leave ratings and reviews of the podcast. It really helps others to discover it. Here's someone in the UK who said, "It amazes me every episode that Tom makes the time to give us such a wonderful gift.

Great to have a sneak peek into the thoughts and theology of Tom from his own lips." So if you can, rate and review us, it helps others to discover the show. You can find out more about the podcast at askntwright.com. And of course, ticketing now open for Unbelievable the Conference 2022. If you like this podcast, I think you'll love spending a day with us.

We're live from the British Library in London. You can come in person, but you can attend anywhere in the world online. We're doing it in a sort of in the afternoon UK time so that especially our friends in the US can join us live on the day.

God unmuted is our theme. So many people joining us across the course of the day, Alistom McGrath, Lisa Fields, Glenn Scrivener, Sharon Dierock, Joseph DeSousa, John Wyatt, Phil Vischer and Sky Jatani and more guests that we'll be announcing soon. Our big conversation event live on the same evening.

Dr Ian McGillchrist and Dr Sharon Dierock's talking about the mind and its master. Loads of exciting stuff plus the launch of our fully fledged new apologetics and theology ministry on that day as well. So if you want to see what it's all about, go to unbelievable.live. The link is with today's podcast.

Really looking forward to this year's conference right now into your questions. Welcome back to the show. Today, we're talking about salvation, which comes through an awful lot in questions in one form or another, Tom.

People very frequently worried about whether they are saved, whether they've done what they need to do to be saved, whether, you know, and it's surprising actually given that the majority of the respondents who come to the show are coming from Protestant traditions, often evangelical traditions, where security of salvation is often very much majored on, you know, that nonetheless people often feel that there's a sort of chance that, you know, something may not have happened or been said or whatever, that might put that in peril. So we'll get that as we come through these questions. We've got one first of all from Matt in tape, or, though, just about the whole question of, can we lose our salvation in the sense of the fact that he sees two passages in Romans that perhaps seem to contradict each other on that front.

So Matt says, I was wondering how Romans 8, chapter 31, verses 31 to 39, which clearly says that nothing can separate us from the love of God, sits alongside Romans chapter 11 verses 17 to 24, which appears to suggest that those who have been grafted onto the branch may be removed. Many thanks. Let me just quote very briefly just from some of that.

So Romans 8 verses 38 and 39 says, "For I'm convinced that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." And then of course that passage about the olive tree and the branches and so on in chapter 11. And I'll just read from verse 22 there. "Note then the kindness and the severity of God, severity towards those who have fallen, but God's kindness towards you provided you continue in his kindness, otherwise you also will be cut off.

There's more I could have read." But I think obviously that Matt sees attention here. How

do you go about resolving that one? The short answer is you write a commentary on Romans because actually both of those passages are embedded within larger units of argument and discourse. And particularly Romans 11 is part of a very careful, very sensitive argument, which is chapters 9, 10 and 11, which is a complete well-rounded, carefully balanced discussion of the place of ethnic Israel in the purposes of God.

This is really important. Many people have said, "Oh, that's just a side issue for Paul. He's talked about salvation and then he has this bit on the Jews." It's not like that at all because for Paul God's plan of salvation is launched with the covenant with Abraham.

And he's talking about in chapter 4. And so the question is if the covenant with Abraham has been fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah, giving us this security, then what's happened to the promises and to the people who thought that they were their ethnic promises, what's happened to them? And that has to be worked through inch by inch Romans 9, Romans 10, Romans 11. Let's just start though with Romans 8. That itself is the climax of a whole argument starting in chapter 5 verse 1. If we're justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ and we boast or rejoice in the hope of God's glory, Romans 5, 1 and 2. And that whole argument lands up with 8:31 to 39. There's an awful lot of stuff in between, but it's the assurance that what God did for Jesus in raising him from the dead, seating him at his right hand, by the Spirit God does and will do for all those who belong to the messianic family.

That's the meaning of in Christ. Nothing in all creation was separated from the love of God, which is in Messiah Jesus our Lord. This is the messianic reality and that is to be sure the source of enormous comfort and hope.

And we kind of grasp that to ourselves again and again in prayer and in gratitude. Of course, before we get to Romans 11 yet, of course, in many passages in Paul, I think of 1 Corinthians, for instance, he says things like, "Let the one who thinks that they're standing take heed lest they fall." That's 1 Corinthians 10 again. And Paul is saying constantly, "Make sure that you are a genuine member.

It's possible to be a hypocrite to slide along, even to get baptized, to mouth some words, and hope that it'll be all right because everyone else seems to be doing all right." And he says, "No, this has got to be real for you. You must put to death all that is earth, the renew, and you must allow the Spirit to do the work of new creation already in you." And of course, Paul knows because he says several things to this effect himself that even in the present life, we are none of us, morally perfect. We are none of us as we would ultimately want to be.

And Christian history and spiritual writings from the earliest days to the present are full of people who quite clearly have the love of God shining through them, but are very conscious of their own continuing shortcomings and failures and so on. And I would put my hand up, both hands up straight away and say, "Yes, me too, absolutely." Then so all

of that is important not to deny the doctrine of assurance, but to say that assurance needs to be fleshed out the whole time. And the minute that assurance becomes complacency, something has become very dangerous.

"Oh yes, I'm securing Christ. If I doubt that, I'm not believing in justification by faith. Therefore, I can go out and do what I like and it doesn't matter how I live because God has promised to save me eventually." Anyone who says that just hasn't got to first base with what Paul is really talking about.

But then in Romans 11, he is talking specifically to Gentile Christians in Rome, the Gentile church in Rome. When Paul was writing Romans, the Jews had only just gone back to Rome, having been expelled several years before by the Emperor Claudius. Claudius died, Nero came to the throne, the Jews come back to Rome and the Gentile Christians seem to be saying, "Who are these Jews? We'd be quite happy not have them back." This following Jesus thing, we've now got that one.

It's now a non-Jewish thing. And Paul says, "If you start saying that, you're being just as arrogant as I, Paul and others of my ilk were before. When we thought that this salvation thing was for us and for us only.

If you think it's for you, Gentiles, and you only, then that can mean that you too would be cut off. You have to continue in God's kindness. And kindness is something which flows through you and hope the other side.

It's a large-scale argument for saying, "Do not despise your Jewish neighbors. Do not regard it as impossible that some of them may come to believe in the Jesus who is after all their own Messiah." That's how I and many others have read that passage. So I don't think in Romans 11, he's talking about individuals.

I think he's talking about the Gentile church in Rome. As with the candlesticks in Revelation chapters 2 and 3, if you're not careful, God can come and remove that candlestick out of its place. Go to Western Turkey now to whom those letters were written in Revelation 2 and 3. Where are the Christian churches? The candlesticks were all removed.

Ditto with North Africa. It is possible for churches that were among the most flourishing and enriched and theologically literate to become completely devastated. That's a warning we should take to heart.

We in the West who think that Christianity is a Western religion. It isn't. It's a global faith.

But the warning, I don't think it's two individuals. I think it's two churches that become complacent. That's really, really helpful, Tom.

On a more personal level, Matthew from Portland, Oregon has a question about personal

salvation, if you will. He says, "I've been struggling a lot lately over what Jesus requires to enter his kingdom. Growing up in the church, I feel we focused far more on what Paul said about salvation, which is obviously quite important.

But I've been reading carefully through the Gospels, and I'm struck by the seemingly high bar for entering the kingdom of God. When Jesus says, "Anyone who is not willing to take up their cross and die is unworthy of him," I wonder whether the persistent sins in my life are evidence that I have not taken up my cross, even though I daily pray to give them to God and earnestly want to grow beyond these sins. Furthermore, Jesus' exhortations to be perfect as the Father is and his warning that many who call him Lord will be dismissed make me worry.

I'm not truly one of his disciples. I have faith in Jesus' identity as God and man, his resurrection and his future coming to restore all things, and my hope is in the fulfillment of these things. But I don't know if I'm worthy, so to speak.

Nor of my family, or those I love in the church. Thank you for everything you do. The podcast is a big help.

Okay. What do you do for someone? Yeah, like Matthew, who just sees this high bar, as he calls it, in the Gospels of Jesus saying, "You need to be willing to take up your cross," and says, "Well, I don't feel like I do that every day, and therefore have I really, if you like, am I deserving of a place in God's kingdom?" It seems to me that there is a kind of oscillation in many people's spirituality, and this has to do, not least with personality types as well, that some people are naturally more reticent and naturally more self-critical, and others are much more bullish and happy just to go ahead and hope it's all going to work out. And some of the latter can abuse the Christian doctrine of assurance, and imagine that, "Oh, yes, I believe in assurance.

That's fine. I'm okay." Now, what's the next question sort of thing? And other people are thinking, "Hang on, we're talking about God, and Jesus, and holiness, and I know my own heart, and I don't seem to be there." So I want to say that, partially, this is something which has to be addressed by wise pastors. You and I have often said on this show that we cannot be a long-range pastor, and because we've never met Matthew from Portland in Oregon, I don't know whether he's, whether this is simply a feature, well, not simply, but it's a feature of the sort of cautious personality that maybe he has.

But I want to say, look carefully at those many passages in the New Testament from people like Paul who say things like, "Who is sufficient for these things?" And the answer is, "Our sufficiency is from God." Now, Paul is there talking about being actual ministers of the New Covenant, and he's spelled out what he means to be a minister of the New Covenant. He said, "Well, who's up for that? Certainly not me, but God has clothed us in his sufficiency." And I think that applies more widely, that at every point where we look at, and it is a high bar, and this business of taking up the cross, yes, I think we all have

to ask ourselves that. That's why, in my tradition, every year, we keep six weeks, which we call Lent in the run-up to Good Friday, when we examine ourselves, and we actually, some people will go through a process of spiritual discernment and reflection, perhaps with a director or going on retreat or something in which we do look into our hearts and say, "What's going on, and what can be done about it? I am not quite what I should be, or where I should be, how can I move forwards?" And the other passage which I find strangely comforting is when Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9 that he doesn't reckon that he's already attained everything, but he pummels his body and subdues it, and he says, "Lest having preached to others, I myself would be cast away so that Paul, the great apostle of assurance, as in Romans and so on, is quite capable of looking in the mirror and saying, "You better watch it, young man, because if you don't control these instincts, this behavior, whatever, if you don't say no to things that you want to do like this and so, and yes to things that you may not want to do but which you know God is calling you to, then you too could be cast away, and that would bring shame not only on you, but on the church and so on." So I want to say there is an appropriate blend of confidence and humility, and actually, though those sound opposites, they're not really because if our confidence is in God, then this isn't self-confidence, it's a constant confidence in God which leaves me in the proper position of humility, of what do you have that you didn't receive, it's all of God's grace anyway, and hence the daily disciplines of prayer, of worship, of scripture study, the daily dying to sin, this is absolutely vital, and so I want to say that wherever you are, try to get some pastoral help locally with somebody who will pray for you and help you think this through, and in case anyone thinks that I should simply have said, "Well, just take the promises in Romans and yes you believe clearly so you are saved and you shouldn't ask any questions," I want to say that Paul himself seems to wrestle with these issues, so I don't see why we shouldn't as well.

Okay, thank you. Matthew, I hope that's helped in some way, and what Matthew is spelled out is also spelled out by others, sort of wrestling with these issues, and I'm going to combine two questions here on this, Dustin from Wyoming and Jenny from Ohio. Dustin says, "With an I to Matthew, chapters 7, verses 21 to 23 and 25, 31 and following, is it possible to think you are saved but not be?" Romans, chapter 10, verse 9 would suggest that belief is relatively straightforward, but what if we think of as believing isn't actually good enough? I know how that sounds, says Dustin, and all that follows from it, not my intention, but to be cheeky, is it possible for our application for Christianity to be rejected and us to not know until we die? I've asked friends but the answers are never terribly satisfying.

Similar question from Jenny who says, "I often find reading the Bible to be scary, probably because I don't understand much of it." I recently read Matthew 7, 21 to 23, where Jesus says, "Many will say, Lord, Lord, on that day, and he will say he never knew them. Who are these people and how can we know we aren't one of them?" So similar questions, you know, could we get to that point and suddenly find ourselves are one of

the ones that Jesus said, "I never knew you." It's a real fear for some people, I think, here, Tom. Yeah, I think it's an appropriate question to ask.

I, again, don't want to dismiss it and say, "Come on, just wake up and believe and read Romans and it'll all be all right." I mean, there is a sense in which if somebody is sort of crippled by or crushed by that fear, then actually reading Romans straight through every evening for a week, the whole letter each day, might well be the answer or read Isaiah 40 to 55 straight through at a sitting each day for a week or each week for a month or something and pray that God will enable you to breathe in these great and wonderful promises and to live within them. But then having done that, I want to say these are perfectly appropriate questions. The Sermon on the Mount, which climaxes in Rome in Matthew 7, is absolutely central in the New Testament portrayal of Jesus' teaching and the challenge in Rome in Matthew 25, the sheep and the goats, in as much as you did it or did it not to the least of these, you did it or did it not to me, these are very serious.

The people of God reformed around and in Jesus are supposed to be the people through whom God's love extends to the ends of the earth. And if we are not being that sort of people, then we should be looking in the mirror and we should be talking to a pastor and we should be saying, "How can I in my vocation, in my life, whatever I'm doing be one of those people who is embodying the gospel in this way?" But it seems to me it's rather like the question which we get asked from time to time about, "Have I committed the unforgivable sin?" You know, Jesus talks about a sin which can't be forgiven, the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. And the usual slightly casual answer, but I think it's true, as if you're worried about having committed it, it's pretty obvious you haven't.

Because actually the warnings about people saying, "Lord, Lord, I think are exactly like what's going on in 1 Corinthians 10 when Paul looks at this flourishing church in Corinth, where suddenly Christianity has become flavor of the month that seems in Corinth and lots of people are pouring into enjoying the worship and it's so lively and it's all different and it's a new religion and wow, we're all having a good time here and let's not worry too much about the old moral issues so it seems in Corinth. And Paul says, "No," said it before, "let the one who thinks they are standing take heed lest they fall. Make real for yourself the promises which you're casually going along with." And tragically, of course, and this is a regular cycle in church life.

It is possible even in the most evangelical or reformed or whatever context for some people just to go along with it because they like the people there, they like the music, and to say, "Lord, Lord, without ever really stopping and thinking and looking at themselves in the mirror or kneeling down in a room by themselves and saying, Lord, where am I actually with you on this?" And particularly this idea of knowing Jesus for oneself, Jesus says, "I never knew you. There is a personal relationship." And that relationship is like all relationships, potentially fragile, potentially it has the potential to be broken from our side. At least we can say, well, don't want to bother about you

anymore.

Thank you very much. Jesus won't say that to us, but what is being talked about there is something which again should inculcate genuine humility. I was glad when genuine from Ohio said, probably because I didn't understand so much, well, none of us understand as much as we would like to, but we can understand enough to know that the Jesus who is issuing those warnings is the Jesus who also said, "Come to me, all who labor and the heavy laden, I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you. Learn from me. I am meek and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your innermost lives." That's the end of Matthew 11.

So we've got to put the whole package together. "Come to that Jesus and then as you learn him more, see what tasks he sets you to and then do them prayerfully and faithfully and trust that he will be with you." I think what you said right at the beginning there was helpful that if you're concerned about this, if you're asking these questions, it suggests that you're not simply asleep at the wheel or not bothered. The people who Jesus is saying, "Lord, Lord, are not people who will be asking this sort of question." People who are almost probably very self-satisfied in their own salvation in that sense.

But thank you very much. All helpful answers. I hope they've been of help to you, Jenny, Dustin, Matthew and Matt, on today's episode of the show.

That's all we've time for for today's episode. But thanks for being with us and we'll see you again next time. Thank you.

Well, I'm looking forward to more of your questions and next time. A variety of pastoral questions that we'll be addressing. Ethical dilemmas and regrets.

Things like, "Should I boycott the World Cup? What about the fact my job involves working on the cell line of an aborted fetus? Was I responsible for my friend's suicide after I rejected his romantic advances?" Lots of interesting stuff. As ever, Tom will make the caveat. He is not anyone's pastor via podcast, but he'll do what he can to give his thoughts on these kinds of questions next week.

You can get more from the podcast at AskNTRipe.com. If you sign up, you'll be able to ask a question, too. And just a reminder that Unbelievable.Live is the place to check out ticketing. But this year's conference in May, some wonderful guests joining us, helping you to take God off mute in your life.

The link, again, is with today's show. For now, thanks for being with us and see you next time.