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#196 Pain and suffering Part 2 (Replay)

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

From the archives: In this second of a two-part episode series looking at the question of Suffering, Tom shares his thoughts on heart-breaking pastoral questions from listeners around how to respond to grief and mental health. • Subscribe to the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast: <https://pod.link/1441656192> • More shows, free eBook, newsletter, and sign up to ask Tom your questions: <https://premierunbelievable.com> • For live events: <http://www.unbelievable.live> • For online learning: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/training> • Support us in the USA: <http://www.premierinsight.org/unbelievableshow> • Support us in the rest of the world: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/donate>

Transcript

Thank you for joining us on this Ask NT Wright Anything podcast today. Before we bid in the program, I want to be sure that you don't miss out on a comforting free resource designed to help those dealing with pain and hurt. The question of why God allows suffering is one of life's greatest theological puzzles.

Christians and non-believers alike have wondered, often in Knight's most painful moments, why doesn't God always heal? And while there are no easy answers, God's words says so much about both our shoes. Welcome to this replay of Ask NT Wright Anything, where we go back into the archives to bring you the best of the thought and theology of God. Tom Wright, answering questions submitted by you, the listener.

You can find more episodes as well as many more resources for exploring faith at PremierUnbelievable.com. And registering there will unlock access through the newsletter to updates, free bonus videos and e-books. That's PremierUnbelievable.com. And now for today's replay of Ask NT Wright Anything. Well, today on the show with Tom, we're tackling some pastoral issues.

And again, we will give our usual caveat here. Tom is a very pastoral person, but he is not your pastor. And if you do have issues, we can only deal with them on a very surface

level, obviously, on the podcast.

Do seek out wise counsel, Christian counsel, that can help you navigate the really difficult pastoral issues. That is what the church is there for. But we will tackle some of these on the programme today, Tom.

And it's part two, really, to the last podcast where we were talking about some of the theological issues around suffering and pain. These are very much practical examples of people navigating that themselves. So why don't we leap right in with Joanna in Connecticut, USA, who says three years ago, I lost my dad very unexpectedly, age 61.

He was such a wonderful father and grandfather, and I miss him terribly. I'm hoping you can provide some practical and theological advice for how I can approach prayer at this stage. In days when my heart feels particularly heavy, I find two key obstacles in prayer.

Firstly, doubts. And I'm deeply sad. Belief can seem like wishful thinking.

Prayer can seem like a silly exercise in just talking or thinking to myself. And secondly, my grief can feel selfish and unimportant. I know how incredibly fortunate I have been in my life and in the scheme of all the suffering in the world, my broken heart can feel selfish and like something I shouldn't really bother God with.

So two things sort of blocking Joanna feeling able to pray in the midst of this grief from losing her father there, doubt, and the feeling that will isn't my grief rather just small and unimportant in the big scheme of things. Yeah. Wow.

Joanna, my heart goes out to you. That sense of tearing loss and of waking up in the morning and then they're being a split second and then it hits you again. He's gone.

He's not there. This is just terrible. And those of us who've faced any such experience know exactly what you're going through, I think.

In the middle of that, I really want to say right up front, this is not selfish and it is not unimportant. God loves your broken heart as much as he loved your unbroken heart before. If anything, I want to say God loves your broken heart even more.

God specializes in broken hearts. God's own heart was broken on the cross. That's what the story is all about.

The grief of God going all the way back to when God looked at the wickedness of humans and it grieved him to his heart. It says that in the Noah story in Genesis. So, I mean, somehow we have to say, actually, God knows about grief too.

And we see that. It's a mystery, of course, as to what that means until we see Jesus. Jesus weeping at the tomb of his friends.

Jesus weeping himself in the Garden of Gethsemane. And in a sense, I would say the only way into prayer in that context will be through inhabiting stories like that. I think where I in your position, Janna, I might want to read through the Gethsemane story in Matthew or Mark or read through the story of John in John's Gospel, Chapter 11, of Jesus going to Bethany to be with Mary and Martha.

And don't hurry on too quickly to the actual raising of Lazarus because there is a moment there where Mary and Martha just come with their broken hearts. Lord, if only you've been here, my brother wouldn't have died. And just stop on that and go into the story yourself and see what Jesus then says to you when you say to him, if you've been here, my dad wouldn't have died.

And resonate with that moment of sorrow and grief before moving on to the promise which is there of the final resurrection, of which the raising of Lazarus is, of course, an extraordinary foretaste. And the doubts which, of course, almost all of us have in prayer when it does just seem rather silly. We're just thinking and talking to ourselves.

I would say this is one of the reasons God has given us the Psalms. Psalms like Psalm 42 and 43, why are you so heavy on my soul? Why are you so disquieted within me? Trust in God. Hope in God.

I will again praise him. I am down in the pit at the moment, but I can see that there might be a place to which I will come and go through that Psalm. Or when it gets really bleak, if you can bear it, go into Psalm 88, which leaves you in the dark, but with the knowledge that somehow it's God's darkness.

And that feels strange because isn't God the creator of light, but actually that's a way through. The Psalms were Jesus' prayer book and they should be our prayer book as well. So that's where I would start with some of those harrowing stories in the gospels to read them slowly and prayerfully becoming a spectator in the crowd who then ceases to be a spectator and becomes somebody who can come herself and spread out her sorrows before Jesus.

And then the Psalms again and again. And as an extra, I've often said to people, sit down, turn off the television and the phones and all the rest of it and read Isaiah 40 to 55 from start to finish straight through. And since Israel in exile, Israel in sorrow, Israel in grief, Israel having lost hope and God saying, actually, I'm God, I can do new things.

And out of that, who knows what's going to grow. Thank you. Thank you, Tom.

Hope that was helpful to you, Kiawana. Let's go to someone in Oklahoma. I won't give the name.

I'll keep this one anonymous, but this is an issue that is so prevalent now. Mental health issues. And I think particularly of prevalence among the younger end of the population,

this person says, I'm 19 and I struggle with an eating disorder, depression and anxiety.

These topics feel a bit taboo to talk about within my church community. I can't help but wonder, does the Bible cover mental illness at all, even though it wasn't really known back then, have I just missed it? Neither of us claim to be experts in this area of mental health, but I am aware, as I'm sure you are, Tom, that they do say this is an increasing issue among young people, possibly exacerbated by the nature of social media and the pressures that puts on young people. And for all of our technological advances, we seem to be failing in this respect, the increasing prevalence of, alongside that, is an increasing willingness, I think, to talk about this in an open way, to acknowledge it, to try to help and not to treat, to sort of shove it under the carpet, perhaps as people may have done.

And even among our churches, I'm seeing positive moves. Now, not this person's church, they say it does still feel like a taboo topic. And I can understand that very often we live in churches where you're supposed to be living in victory.

And if you, well, I feel depressed, that sort of somehow you feel like a failure, you know. Well, there's lots, lots to potentially talk about there, but what about this person themselves? Do you think the Bible itself covers mental illness at any level? Yeah, as I read the Psalms, which I just mentioned in the answer to the previous question, there are points in the Psalms where I think if somebody came to me and said, this is how I feel, I would think as a pastor, I think this is above my pay grade, I think we need to help you find a psychotherapist, some kind of mental health counseling, because that's not my training, that's not my particular gifting, but I'm aware of it as a hugely important part of what has to be done within the larger community. And I, like anyone, I have suffered from severe depressions at certain points in my life, in my early 30s and once or twice since, and I've known amazing counseling and help, sometimes within the church and sometimes outside the church.

So, I mean, I'm very much aware of that. And I think also, the passage in the New Testament, which strikes me particularly, is the first chapter of 2 Corinthians, where St. Paul says, I want you to know that when I was in Ephesus, I got to the point where I despaired of life itself. And that is almost a definition of a nervous breakdown.

And they don't have, of course, that category of nervous breakdowns because we're the medical literature, I don't think at the time covers that sort of thing. Although I think the sophisticated doctors in the Hellenistic world were aware of the continuity between the mind and the body and the way that some bits of who we are in our environment may make us gloomy. They talk about the different humors and people being in a black humor, meaning that something has got out of balance and things that ought to be stable, have tipped over one way or another.

And we all know how to have our different metaphors for it. In the Bible, I think what we find rather is human beings being called somehow to trust God in a very strange and

often threatening world. And there are many passages in the Old Testament as well as the new, which are very strange and threatening, and where, I mean, in the book of lamentations, that lament is of somebody whose the bottom has dropped out of their world completely.

What on earth are they going to do? And though it's not described as mental illness, it seems to me that this person has got into an extraordinary depression and despair. So it's not that it's absent from the Bible, and it's certainly not the case that all Christians should be happy all the time. Sorry, that's just not how life is.

And it seems to me from the Psalms and the example of Jesus, that's not how we should expect life to be. And Paul himself is in prison half the time, and some of the time that seems to be pretty miserable, even though he then writes encouraging letters to people. So that I think we need to break through the taboos, and if your church circle can't do that, you need prayerfully to seek out help somewhere in your community, even just googling, you know, local mental health facilities or whatever.

There should be help somewhere. Ideally these days, many churches are being much more sensitive to that need for help, and if one gently asks somebody on the pastoral team church, they may actually say, oh well yes, I'm glad you came to me, I can steer you in this direction. There are helps like that, which can be offered.

But at the age of 19, that's really hard, and I have known people at that age struggling with eating disorders and depression and anxiety. And I want to assure you that the community as a whole should be holding onto you in prayer and loving you through this, because this is a tough time. When I was a student chaplain, I met it all the time, this kind of thing.

And we will come through this together, but it's got to be something where you can link arms with friends and where you can go and weep with those who will weep with you, preferably in the church who can pray for you as well. And God will be with you in that dark time. But cling on to the story of Jesus in and through it all.

If I could recommend one particular resource that I think is fantastic on this front, the Mind and Soul Foundation is a very helpful Christian charity that specifically deals in these areas, you can find them online. MindandSoulFoundation.org. Thanks Justin, that was news to me, I'm afraid because I haven't worked in that area in the last decade or so.

I would like to take just a moment to remind you that it's listeners like you who make programs like this one today possible through your financial support. In fact, your kick today is so important that we would like to say thanks for your gift by sending you a copy of the e-book, *Is God Dead, Faith, Culture and the Modern Worlds*. It's a powerful resource that unpacks where today's generations are turning in an increasingly post Christian society and how you can stand strong in your faith, igniting a renaissance of

belief.

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Again, we get all kinds of questions and some of them are longer than others. This is on the longer end but gives us a sense of the background to this pastoral question. Again, anonymous but from Iowa.

This person says it's hard to ask this question without letting you into my past. I'm a 30-year-old man who's married with three kids. I grew up a missionaries kid in the 90s in Bangladesh.

During that time, I was repeatedly molested by an older boy. I honestly have forgiven the person and completely understand this could very well have been something that happened to him and was just repeated to me. But nevertheless, the scars remain and I suffer from depression and a sense of loss.

After the 90s, my dad became a pastor in America and at this time I was 12, a trusted man in church came over when my parents were not home and bought a DVD case full of pornography. Truthfully, I was excited at the time. Now, looking back, I feel a deep sense of shame and disgust towards this person.

I'm not trying to throw a pity party for myself, but the truth is I simply wish I didn't come to be. I wish I had never existed. I grew up learning about God and having a sensitive awareness of my sins.

I just struggle so much. I want to love God, but I feel as though he's done with me. I already know the answer, he isn't, but it doesn't feel that way at all.

I'm so sorry to throw this all on you. I don't really want to speak to my pastor because, well, my pastor is my dad. I just pray and hope that your wisdom can see through this mess and give me some sort of hope or guidance and goes on here.

I feel such a loss and hate for myself. I feel like such a disappointment to my family. I've been drinking myself away and the thought of God just hurts.

It doesn't feel freeing or relieving to even turn to God. It feels burdensome. So maybe this is my question or at least one of them.

Can God change me? Or will he allow me into his kingdom if I were to die this day, having done not a single thing for him other than just asking him to forgive me. I always grew up learning that sinners will burn for eternity. And frankly, that's where I feel

destined.

Thanks so much. Do love the podcast and I've been listening to my other podcast. I believe from since 2011.

Well, you haven't given us your name, but that's absolutely fine. It's understandable. This is this is a heart-rending, isn't it, Tom? But where do you bring that? My heart absolutely goes out to this poor man and it is a multiple tragedy and the fact of the difficulty about turning to the pastor because the pastor is the dad who may or may not know about some of the back story here.

That makes it multiply worse. And I would say please, please, without any disrespect to your father, find a different pastor locally. Somebody who you can talk to either on the phone or preferably in person, somebody who can weep with you, somebody who can journey with you, who can work through key, scriptural texts, et cetera with you.

I just feel like more of the same, more of the burden. And this awful sense, which I've met in other people who've been physically or sexually abused or molested, that somehow they are guilty, that they're dirty, that they are scarred and they are ashamed, even though it was something that other people lured them into. And that is terrible.

And so many people live with that sense of shame. And I want to say the gospel is all about Jesus coming to the place where there's the woman taken in adultery at the beginning of John 8. There's wonderful scenes in the Old Testament where God is basically saying, here we are, life is beginning again, Isaiah 54. I mean, I would like to say to this person, just live with Isaiah 54 for a week, read it, memorize it, learn it, pray that God will enable you to hear him speaking to you in the middle of all of that.

But then there's something else as well. This is a man who's married with three kids. We don't know what his wife thinks about this.

We don't know what sort of relationship they have. But if possible, to share some of this at least with the spouse is, it may be difficult. It may be something that can't happen immediately, but that would be one thing to work towards.

But there are three children who desperately need their dad and they need him to be there for them. And it may be that in somehow learning to be there for them, there may be a possibility of opening yourself to being the channel of God's love for them. And as God's love comes through you to them in whatever ways are appropriate.

So that love will be rinsing you out in various ways. That may sound like an ideal solution. It isn't a solution.

It's a it's a vocation. But in the pursuit of that vocation to be the best father that you can be for these children. And we are none of us as good fathers as we would like to be, but

we all have a sense of what that might be like and we can work towards it.

So some of that same love will, as it were, rub off on you. That would be my hope. I would also say, you say, I've been drinking myself away.

Please stay away from that because that way all sorts of dangers lie. And I do understand about the thought of God just hurting. I know people in exactly that position.

And I think the way for that not to hurt is for you to love your children. And for you to ask God, please help me to be for them, the father who will show them what fatherhood really is like. And maybe you will start to receive something of God's father love as you do it.

I'm quite eaten up with these questions. I wish I could be a pastor to this person, even though it's obviously inappropriate and impossible. But I will pray for these people who have written in, even though at the moment they're anonymous, some of them are.

And just hope and pray that through the ministry of the larger church, even where the pastor of the own church is is not somebody to whom you can turn. There will be healing. There will be hope.

There will be a turn in the road. But the Psalms and the stories of Jesus and passages like Isaiah 54 are places that I would cling to for dear life. And I suppose it goes without saying that for this and indeed some of the other questions we've read, counseling is important.

And of course, it may well be within a Christian context, but there are equally secular forms of counseling, which can be very helpful and beneficial in helping people work through. And I just have a sense that this person really does need to have that kind of input. Part of the trouble with our generation is that we've treated Christianity as though it was an individual sport.

It isn't. It's a team sport. We're supposed to be part of the body of Christ.

And that means we're all supposed to be enmeshed together. And part of the reason maybe why we don't hear so much about mental illness in the first century is because everyone, or most people, were part of larger networks and communities where things could be sorted out in different ways. We have tried to live as individuals and we often crash and burn.

And the fear of burning for eternity, that's really horrible. And it sounds to me as though this person is not on that track at all. But actually, it's a burning which is going on right now and which is being projected into the future.

And we want to hope and pray for alleviation for that burning right now, because that's

where the hurt is. Yes, I mean, the question at the core of this was, can God change me? Well, I suppose change happens in all kinds of ways. And obviously, we want and we believe God wants healing for this person.

But that may be a long road and it may require absolutely taking some practical steps to put yourself in a position where people can speak and God can work through counseling through. And extraordinarily, that can be a very long, slow process, but there can be sudden hikes in the process. It can happen through somebody else's prayer suddenly that something is released, a moment of turning in the road, a moment of the clouds parting and sunlight coming.

You can't organize that, you can't program it. But God can and please God in this case will do such things. And may you come through and round and out into the light.

And I can testify for that that I know people and the person I have in mind specifically who I would say they have struggled with something and prayed to God. And counseling has been an enormous special mission. And I would just say that is an answer to prayer.

God uses counseling. God can use all kinds of means. But again, we're just scratching the surface on this, obviously, even with a fairly lengthy question.

We don't know all the details, but we thought our prayers are with you and for that situation and all the others we've covered. Tom, thank you so much for your time. You're so generous.

And we look forward to seeing you again. For now, thank you very much and we'll see you next time. Thank you.

Great to be with you again.