

# OpenTheo

## #182 Questions about marriage and divorce (Replay)

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### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

From Feb 2020: Tom answers listener questions about marriage including: What will our married relationships look like in the new creation? What advice do you have for someone about to get married? What do you think about divorce? Can I get married to a non-Christian? • 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

Before we get into today's episode, I want to let you know about a unique ebook that's yours to download free today. It's called Google in God and it holds truth filled answers to the top five questions that people ask online about God. Googling God is a resource that everything Christian should have to hand.

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Download your copy of Google in God today by visiting [premierinsight.org slash resources](http://premierinsight.org/resources). That's [premierinsight.org slash resources](http://premierinsight.org/resources). And now for today's podcast.

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 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](http://premierunbelievable.com) and registering there will unlock access through the newsletter to updates free bonus videos and ebooks. That's [premierunbelievable.com](http://premierunbelievable.com). And now for today's replay of Ask NT Wright Anything. We're going to be looking at things of a more pastoral nature and I'm surprised in a way Tom, how many questions that come in that are pastoral essentially.

And it's probably important, as we have said before, to say anything that you deal with that's pastoral, obviously you would rather people primarily seek a pastor they can speak to pray with go on that journey with. Yes. That is really important.

I mean, I get emails from people saying help help I'm in this situation, et cetera. And my first thing is always I cannot be your pastor online. It's just not how pastoral work works.

You need to be able to sit down in a quadrant. And with somebody who can pray with you, who can weep with you if you're weeping. And who can engage in a longer journey because though I like to solve things when they come through my door, almost all pastoral problems, if they're serious enough to come through the door of the study, I'm not going to be solved in one visit.

This is going to be a journey. We're going to have to go together. And obviously I can't do that.

So with that caveat, we will try to give some general principles. Now, next week's will be a whole variety of pastoral questions, but today it's marriage. But before we get to the sort of the nuts and bolts of how we make marriage work as Christians, a couple of people asked similar questions about marriage in the age to come.

So Clayton in Melbourne, Australia and Jenny in Virginia, they asked these questions. With what I can only understand the Bible implies that as a married couple, we are to become as one, yet there seems to be verses that imply this is only for this earth, and what's your opinion? And Jenny says, I know we won't be married in heaven, but will I still remember my husband and will we still be good friends like we are? Or maybe I should have just asked whether we'll know our family and friends. So there's sort of both questions I think are keying on the idea of what will that age to come through? Some be like they use the word heaven, I know that you maybe prefer to use a different word and we'll get to that.

But I think the idea being people people thinking, well, will I still be in some sense related to that person in the life to come? Or will that somehow have evaporated? And of course, what will that look like? Of course. And I mean, one of the fascinating things about the New Testament, unlike some religious books, ancient and modern, is its refusal to speculate beyond a very, very tiny distance into what the age to come will actually be like. And Jesus is quite clear that it will involve resurrection and in his debate with the Sadducees that is very clear.

And indeed, the Sadducees are pushing him on this kind of thing. They're trying to kind of catch him out. Well, on this question of supposing we have this woman who marries one brother than another and then finally she dies too, whose wife is she going to be? And Jesus says that that's missing the point.

And the point that Jesus is making there is not, by the way, about going to heaven. It's not just a different language, a different concept that, can I just do a riff on this for a second? In the 16th century, the Reformers were faced with the doctrine of purgatory, which had taken over the Western Medieval Church. And in order to combat that, they said, no, you don't have purgatory.

If you're a Christian, you go straight to heaven because that was the choice either straight to heaven or nah, purgatory. And they ignored, and I think that's too strong a word, and I think Carl Barton others would agree with me on this, the Reformers ignored the teaching about New Heavens and New Earth and a bodily resurrection into that New Heavens and New Earth after a time of being addressed. And the rest is called Paradise, call it heaven if you like, though the New Testament doesn't use the word heaven for that, but it'll be heaven and earth joined together.

Otherwise we collapse into a form of Platonism. Okay, end of riff, but it's really important. So what Jesus is saying is that in the New Age, we will no longer be mortal.

We will no longer die. There will be no more death and therefore no need for reproduction and therefore no need for ordinary marriage as we know it, which has procreation as one of its normal primary goals. Obviously, there are many marriages where you don't have children and that's okay too, which is another question that people do often ask.

Has something gone wrong with me because dot dot dot. And it's very clear in Genesis 2, the man leaves his father and mother cleaves to his wife and they're one flesh and there's nothing about as long as they have children. Right.

That they are who they are. That's really rather important. But normally, this is part of the way in which under God or the normal means by which God renews the human population.

That won't be necessary in the age to come. And therefore, and this goes back to the early fathers speculation about whether there will be any equivalent of what we currently know as sexual relations or whether that will be something which because it won't be necessary and required, we won't actually wanted or delight in it in the way we now do, etc, etc. That speculation were not told definitely about that.

Then we go to the question of the people that we've loved and lost. Will we know them again? And there what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4 is really important because he is

giving a word of comfort and he says that ultimately we will all be together. Now, people have got hung up about that passage because it's the famous Rapture passage.

And actually, that's a misreading of that text. And it's much more important to say that Paul's point is God is looking after those things. Those who have died are loved ones who have gone before us.

And they and we will be together in God's new age. And there's no question of, oh, dear, will we know them? Will we recognize them? It's assumed that it will be a glorious mutual welcome and recognition. But of a sort which and inner mode which we at present can only distantly imagine.

And this is where I go back to the whole question of music, that it seems to me one of the things that music does is to open up the possibility of imagining of other worlds where different things happen and different possibilities are there. We need all those imaginative resources, not that we can then draw an exact picture of what it's going to be like, but that we can be assured that God having made us and loved us and redeemed us in Christ and indwelt us by the Holy Spirit is not going to forget us, is not going to regard the love which we have presently shared as, oh, that's just a temporary blip and you're all going to be anonymous from now on. Far from it, we're going to be more vividly ourselves than we've ever been before.

And I understand the sentiment that for instance, Jenny has about, will I still remember my husband, will we still be friends? There's a sense in which this is so important to me here and now in my life. Why wouldn't it be important to be there? Of course. But you're saying in some sense that that will be both fulfilled and transcended.

Yeah, C.S. Lewis says, I think it's in the Great Divorce or one of those or possibly screethab letters, that the loves that we will retain are the loves that have been subject to the cross and resurrection in the present life. In other words, if we tried to cling on to something and idolise it, then that grip may have to be broken. But a good healthy, outgoing, normal human love is a God-given gift and God doesn't give gifts like that in order to snatch them away.

And it's been helped for me when I've been thinking through this because obviously some people do get married and others don't. Paul, as far as we're in it, Owen was never married, Jesus was never married, but were fully human and loved by God. But the ultimately, the greatest marriage is going to be that final one, the picture of which we have as the marriage supper of the Lamb.

And for me, I've always felt like all of these things that we experience in this life to use another Lewis metaphor are shadows compared to that ultimate marriage, that ultimate thing that within which we'll see all of these relationships as having had there. Yes, I'm sure that's right. I mean, the danger of the shadows metaphor is that can take you back

to Plato again.

But yes, exactly. And there are deep and rich friendships as well, sometimes which seem to be friendships which are on a different plane entirely from marriage and sometimes very vivid. And I don't mean sort of quasi-erotic alternative friendships, just rich friendships for sort, which our Western world has largely forgotten actually, but which can be very close and very meaningful.

And again, it seems to me that bond of love is a gift of God, which isn't going to be just, oh, that was just playing around, we're not going to do that anymore. Well, let's move from the age to come to the age where we currently inhabit. And the complexities that obviously exist when it comes to relationships, marriage and so on.

It's just some practical advice being asked for by Joshua in Rochester, Texas, says, thank you for the wonderful teachings and writings. They've been incredibly helpful to me and my ministry here in rural Texas. I passed her a small Baptist church and I'm getting married in June.

Well, well, congratulations because that date has obviously passed already. So, but you say, I've lived alone. What advice firstly would you give to a man, a particular pastor who's getting married in his 30s? I've lived alone for several years and I'm looking forward to building a marriage on the foundation of Jesus.

What do you believe the best way is to do this? And he says, I can also throw in some advice to a lot of the way. But let's go to the one who has far, far more years of experience. It is a huge challenge and responsibility and it's of course both glorious and utterly demanding.

And yeah, Maggie and I have been married for 48 years. She sometimes wonders what she did wrong to deserve all that. But I think a lot of pastors wives particularly would resonate with that.

And I think one of the things that we have learned and that many friends that we've got have learned in different ways is that whatever you think it's going to be like, actually it's going to be both more glorious and much harder. And I think particularly in the world of the early 21st century, there are so many cultural expectations which are still starting around but which have all been questioned and challenged. And as we grow and as we change and as we get to know one another and discover that this person who you love very deeply at one level is actually a more mysterious and sometimes rather strange and off putting character.

I hadn't realized that because of course whenever you're close to anyone in a close friendship or even within a family brothers and sisters, the more you get to know them, the more you realize, I didn't know that he thought like that. I didn't expect her to say

that. And the most mysterious people that we know are the ones we know best as it were, which is a wonderful thing.

But also scary and that demands humility and it demands a willingness to say, I thought life was meant to be like this. Clearly you think it's meant to be like that. Now, can we negotiate that? Is there room for that negotiation? How do we do that? And how do we address things? And those are things to be learned.

And that's why I would always advise couples if it's at all feasible to have like you would regularly go to the doctor or the dentist for a checkup. To go every so often for a checkup to a wise, friendly, experienced pastor just to say, this is where we are. We're not at death's door and not going to the divorce courts.

But we really want to make sure we're actually listening to each other and so on. And that is demanding particularly because the other partner may suddenly blurt out something and you think, I didn't realize you were feeling that all the time. And having the resilience to handle that is really important.

But that learning that resilience is important for later on down the track when difficult and bad things happen when you have a sick child or when something goes wrong financially or whatever it is, you need to build that trust. And then to realize as well that the way we pray together now and an engaged Christian couple, I would assume are at least starting to pray together, that may not be the way that we both develop and our sleep patterns may be different. And we may need to have some separate times of prayer that doesn't mean we're ignoring each other, but especially for a pastor to figure out what church going is to be like.

Some pastors' wives love being pastors' wives and sitting in a particular pew with their children or friends or whatever. Others find that very, very difficult and to be prepared to be flexible and not assume that we know what these roles are going to be like. And particularly to guard the time together and the days off and so on, which I haven't always been good at doing myself, but I've tried.

So there's lots of advice like that. Absolutely. I want to say go for it.

Hope it's working out well. And from my perspective, with far less years I don't know about a belt of married life, but it is about learning to sacrifice for the other person. Marriage is a constant battle of putting down your own wants for the sake of the other person.

That's why obviously the marriage of Jesus and the church is cast in that way. It's a self-sacrificial thing, which sounds great in theory, but is very difficult in practice. It's difficult in practice.

And I mean, one of the things which I've written a lot about over the last 20 years is the

faithfulness of God, Paul and the faithfulness of God. And somebody produced a book of essays about my book and it's called God and the Faithfulness of Paul. And as I look at those titles, I think, yes, faithfulness, reliability, trustworthiness, it bounces back at all of us.

And if we think faithfulness in this moment and to this person and for this is difficult, imagine what it's like for God being faithful to us. We mess up so often and so badly, and yet God remains faithful. That's what we're called to be.

One of the best bits of advice I've ever had actually was the person who preached at our wedding was the chaplain of my wife's college at Oxford, Trevor Williams. Oh, yes, yes, interesting. And the Trinity.

And he said, whatever you do, let God be God in your marriage. Don't make the other person God. The greatest mistake people make is treating the other people as though they're going to be the answer to their property.

You're never the answer. Yeah, you're the person. Let God be God.

Yes. And you be who you are. Well, well, well, well, well, well, it's good.

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That's [premierinsight.org](http://premierinsight.org) slash N-T-Right. Thank you for your support. Deena in Switzerland asks the next, perhaps obvious question, which should, well, what are you of use on divorce and remarriage in Christianity? When is it allowed and could one distinguish between God's will versus man's in terms of what he tolerates from man given our obvious shortcomings? So where did you want to begin on this one? Yeah, I mean, the New Testament is pretty clear that divorce is pretty well normally not what God wants.

And that's in the standard passages in Mark 10 and in parallels there and in 1 Corinthians 7. And that that is a demand for faithfulness, almost doggedness, et cetera, et cetera. And it's interesting because though in the Old Testament you do get passages to say the same thing, like Malachi. God says I hate divorce.

Where there it was a question of Jews who got married young and now back in the land after the geographical exile, there were all these other people around and some of them were bored with their present wives. And so why not? And Malachi says no absolutely not. Stay faithful to the wife of your youth.

But in the Old Testament there's all sorts of shenanigans going on about marriage and stuff and polygamy and so on. But in the New Testament part of the point of the Gospel is that we are supposed to be in some way or other people of the new creation. And that means as Jesus strongly emphasizes and as Paul strongly emphasizes one man, one woman for life.

That is basic. Now the permissions that are then given, which are permissions rather than commands, in Matthew, in the Sermon on the Mount and then again in Matthew 19, it's in the case of unchastity, presumably adultery or some other sexual misbehavior of whatever it is, that then if adultery has taken place, that doesn't mean you have to divorce, but it means that already within the community Jesus envisages and that Matthew is instantiating, this is a possibility. Interestingly in those passages in Matthew, there are lots, we were talking in an earlier podcast about textual variations, there are lots of textual variations in the manuscript tradition.

And it's as though the early church transcribing this stuff was aware that this was a really difficult thing. But it seems to me when the crucial thing is that the Pharisees say to Jesus, well so why then did Moses give us this thing about divorce? And Jesus says because of the hardness of your hearts, but from the beginning it was not, that's a really tough saying. Because what that means is that Jesus is claiming to offer a cure for the hardness of heart.

Now as a pastor and as somebody who's been married nearly half a century, I know that hearts do not just get softened automatically overnight, something has to be worked at, prayed out, struggled with, wept over, etc. The other permission which is given in 1 Corinthians 7 is if a Christian and a non-Christian are married and the non-Christian really doesn't want this anymore, perhaps in Corinth because I'm a citizen of Corinth, we have these gods in our house and we have these gods down the street and we as a family are just going to do this stuff. And the Christian just says, well this is going to be really hard and the non-Christian says, well in that case I'm out of this.

Paul says in that case you are not bound, you are not stuck in that. I assume that in both those cases divorce because of unchastity and divorce because of Christian non-Christian, this includes remarriage, otherwise it isn't divorce, it isn't included. It's mere separation.

But so that's the principle but working that out in practice I know is tough. It's inevitably going to have to be a short answer to what is a huge area but I hope it's helped in some way, Dina. Another one, this is another tricky ethical question, Madeline in Atlanta wants



to ask about contraception.

She says, should Christians use contraception other than natural family planning in married sex and is sex only for the purpose of procreation? Are there any ethical differences between types of contraception? Now I'm not expecting you to be here as a biological expert or anything, Tom, but obviously feels that this is something you might be able to help at least from a biblical kind of perspective as to whether there is anything pertinent to this issue. There's not much in the Bible about the sort of things that we know today about the use of medications or physical aids because that's just not what was available in the ancient world. It does seem to me that in Genesis, in the Song of Songs and in various hints of the New Testament, there is the mutual delight of the couple which is absolutely central and what little I think we know in terms of psychobiology as it were.

The act of sexual intercourse actually does as we used to say, maybe not so often, make love. It can actually generate physical reactions which are loving towards this. It's almost like those moments in a Shakespeare play where someone sprinkles very first person they see when they wake up, etc.

I think that is a reflection of something which is really true and that holds the marriage together and that's true whatever forms of contraception, etc. being used. It seems to me sometimes contraception can be used selfishly.

We're just so enjoying being together. We're not going to have any of those stupid little brats running around being smelly. It seems to me in the present state of the world, it's unwise possibly even disobedient to God's command to be stewards of creation that we all have limitless numbers of children.

My grandfather was one of 15 of whom 13 survived to adulthood. People had vast families because in the late 19th century, Hooping Cough could carry them all off overnight. So they wanted there to be some children left.

We now... What's your response then to perhaps some of our Catholic listeners? I know we have an understanding of who might feel that actually there is an injunction on us to always make at least it possible for that act to result in the creation. I think that's an over-literalization like some other bits of teaching in my church as well, which have sort of rather homed in on one thing. And the idea within Roman Catholicism of the natural rhythm method, actually, when you talk to people who've tried to practice that is anything but natural.

It's all about thermometers and calendars and charts and so on. It's highly unromantic. And I want to say we need to lighten up about this, but in terms of rejecting the selfishness of sex is just for my pleasure and I don't want to have any children, then we must reject that.

I suppose to some extent the sexual revolution did effectively divorce the sexual act from procreation. And regardless of the specifics of contraception, there's a sense in which it's become something different to what it perhaps always was considered to be. Yes, absolutely.

And that's something we have to navigate very carefully because like a lot of other medical innovations, that there was a great blessing in this poor woman who was expected to have another child every year, whether she wanted one or not, until she finally died at age 50 of sheer exhaustion. And I want to stand with those women who say, thank goodness we aren't bound to that anymore. Kendra in Tampa, Florida, and this will be our final question for this session, has a very again pastoral practical question and again caveat supply Kendra that we obviously want you to seek out good pastoral advice specifically.

But here's the story. It says, I'm a 38 year old Christian woman in a relationship with a wonderful man and we want to get married, but he's not yet a believer. He attends church with me and though not opposed to my faith, he doesn't believe it for himself.

When we first met, I told him I would not marry someone who didn't share my commitment to Jesus, but in our question, if marrying an unbeliever would be disobedient to the Lord or not. When I discuss this with other believers from the Baptist church, I attend, they always bring up to Corinth in 614 about not being unequally yoked. But is this the one passage really about marriage and does it or any other scripture mean that marriage to an unbeliever is sinful? I'm well aware that marrying an unbeliever will inevitably create greater strain and hardship on the marriage, but God leads us down difficult roads all the time.

I want to know if God instructs directly against marrying an unbeliever or if this is one of those decisions left up to us to work out with him on a case by case basis. Wow. Yeah, my heart goes out to somebody in that situation who's obviously of a certain age and maybe thinking, you know, biological clock ticking and all of that.

The first thing I think I really do want to say is that marriage in the 21st century in the Western world is tough. Anything that makes it tougher is going to be hard and it really is going to be hard. This isn't just a matter of, oh, we love each other so much, it'll work out.

You know, there are big difficulties here. And marriage between two devout Christians is hard. And the fact that you pray together, you go to church together and you read the Bible together doesn't mean that it isn't hard.

And if you don't have that, then that's tough and the casualty rate is high. Now, in the New Testament, it isn't just 2 Corinthians 6, it's also that very interesting little flicker in 1 Corinthians 7 when Paul says that somebody whose first husband has died is free to

marry again. And then he says only in the Lord.

And it's rather like the Jewish endogamy, which is to say you marry in the Jewish world, so Paul sees the Christian family as a family and that you marry in the family. Now, so that's Paul, however, and this is a curious thing, not a lot of people know this, but in the early church on to the 2nd and 3rd century, one of the reasons that Christianity spread is that the Christian is spread. Was that there were more Christian women around than there were pagan women, for the very simple but sad reason that pagans, if they'd had one daughter already, would get rid of any other ones.

They'd throw them to the wolves, quite literally, or they would sell them into slavery or whatever. So there weren't that many non-Christian women comparatively with non-Christian men. So many non-Christian men married Christian women and either converted themselves or at least let the wife bring the kids up as Christians.

So that's one of the reasons why, by the time of Constantine, even though the church had been persecuted, there were more and more Christians and eventually Constantine says, okay, you guys win. Now that's ambiguous, but so it's clear that if the church at that point had said no, no, no, we're not marrying non-Christians, that wouldn't have happened. But I think wisdom suggests that the putative husband there, the possible husband there, goes with you, questioner, to see your pastor, to talk through this and to figure out if there are any things that can be explained about the faith.

And why not, if he loves her, why doesn't he want to explore that? And there are big questions to be asked there. Big questions, obviously questions that Kendra fully anticipates. And from just from reading her brief question here, I can see that she's not going into this blind.

No, no, quite quite obviously. But obviously, the cultural support and help is absolutely of the essence. But there is, on a purely practical level, it's difficult.

I mean, the average church here in the UK is probably spits to about two thirds women, men and men. And there is that simple mathematical fact that there aren't enough Christian men to go around. And so it's going to be, in that sense, much harder on average Christian women to find Christian partners.

Yes, yes. And I can understand why this becomes such a pressing problem. No, it has been, it has been and is.

But I think if the husband thinks this is simply a hobby that my wife has, then sorry, this isn't just a hobby. This is something that affects everything. I hope that's been helpful in some way, Kendra.

There are never easy answers to these really, you know, practical, pastoral questions. But do appreciate you getting in touch and all the others who got in touch with their

questions on marriage. This edition, we cover all kinds of things, don't we, Tom, on this podcast.

I do. Car mechanics next week, no. We'll leave it there for this week's episode.

Great to have you on the show again. Thank you very much. And whether you are married or not, I hope that it's been a blessing to you.

And we'll see you next time. Thank you.