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#68 Live audience show with Tom Wright and Tom Holland Pt 1

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Justin hosts NT Wright and Tom Holland for a live audience edition of the Ask NT Wright Anything show at Unbelievable? 2021.

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Transcript

[MUSIC] The Ask NTY Anything podcast.

[MUSIC] Hello and welcome. I'm Justin Briley, Premiers Theology and Apologetics Editor and the show brought to you as ever by Premier SBCK and NTYT Online, bringing you the thought and theology of New Testament scholar and former Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright.

Today, a real treat for you. We're playing you part one of our live audience. Ask NTYT right anything show that was recorded as part of Unbelievable, the conference 2021 just a few weeks ago.

Over 2,000 people registered for this year's conference on how to tell the greatest story ever told and you can get all of the video sessions in high definition at our conference page that's unbelievable.live. It was a real pleasure to conclude the conference with what you're hearing on today's show and it included a special guest to secular historian,

Tom Holland, contributing. Tom Holland's magisterial book *Dominion* has been making waves in secular and Christian circles with his argument that pretty much everything Western civilization values and takes for granted is a product of the Christian revolution. He gave an amazing talk at the conference titled, *Why I Changed My Mind About Christianity and Why It Matters*.

So do enjoy part one of this live Ask NTYT right anything show and don't forget you can find out more and sign up to ask a question yourself at the show page ask.NTYT.com and again for all of the videos from this year's conference check out Unbelievable.live. We sit down on a regular basis Tom Wright you and I to answer all kinds of questions while you do the answering I ask them of you and they range from the pastoral to the cultural to the ethical to the biblical to the theological and I'm always stunned by the way you managed to just off the bat sort of respond to so many varied questions. We're fortunate today to have Holland joining us as well. Very much not a bishop.

He doesn't know what off the bat means. Well look any that you feel you have something to say to Tom Holland you you dive in and and I'm looking at it now there's quite a few that I think we will have something helpful to add but we'll keep the focus on you Tom Wright to start us off at least on these questions as we go through them and as I say do keep them coming in this is a live edition of our Ask NTYT right anything podcast if you haven't discovered it yet go and look it up we're available on all the major podcast platforms and it's just a weekly dose of several questions being asked of Tom and hearing his wisdom in response. Let's start off with let me see.

Okay here we go. This is an interesting one I you may not have been able to hear this when we had the conversation with Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell but Josh told an interesting story about how he had someone had come to faith through him by him telling them about hell that was the thing that he had sort of told and he said you know and he's not saying that's the mode everyone it happens for everyone but you know sometimes people come in all kinds of unusual ways to faith and Richard asks I noted Josh McDowell talking about apologetics in terms of heaven and hell but neither Tom Wright or Tom Holland have said much about that at all in the context of how the church can communicate the gospel in a pandemic affected world. So how do you respond to that sort of approach of talking in terms of heaven and hell? I know this is something you've talked about a lot yourself Tom.

I didn't hear the thing that Josh McDowell was doing but of course that has been traditional in some parts particularly of certain styles of American Christianity and Protestantism but also in many parts of traditional Catholicism one thinks of that awesome scene in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist* as a young man where there's this great sermon fulminating about hell and all that'll happen in it etc all that all you lose and suffer which drives the young hero to confession and etc. My problem with that is basically biblical that in the Bible Jesus is talking about the kingdom of God arriving on

earth as in heaven and that it's in the particularly the medieval tradition but comes ultimately from Plato that we've swapped that for this idea of leaving this earth and going either to heaven or to hell and that's become absolutely basic for a whole lot of western Christianity and it isn't totally wrong in that of course in the New Testament God the Creator loves his creation and can't stand the thought of people messing it up and destroying it and defacing themselves and other human beings and if God is a good God he must hate apartheid he must hate child abuse etc etc and ultimately if somebody says I don't care whether there's a God or not I'm just wanting to do A, B and C and I'm going to get on and do it then sooner or later God has to say no to that or he is not the God of the Bible the God of justice the Creator who longs to see his creation fulfilled as long as we're talking about creation fulfilled or renewed or restored with judgment as the corollary of that that's a very different picture from this idea of this world as simply a moral school room where you're all taking an exam and a lot of you are going to fail it and then you're out on your ear and it'll be the worst for you etc that's not how the Bible puts it of course Paul says God has fixed a day on which he will judge the world with true justice by a man whom he's appointed he's saying that by the way to the people in the high court in Athens in Act 17 who think that they are the senior court in the world and he's saying no actually the God who is the Creator is the senior court so I don't want to do of course I don't want to do away with the idea of judgment but to frame the whole evangelistic push in that way it seems to me is to build into the message from the beginning something which would then have to be deconstructed later on for a healthy Christianity to emerge okay thank you very much another question this is more on the church itself Joshua asks do you think that the modern church in some of its incarnations has become too emotionally based and I think they're thinking of more sort of charismatic Pentecostal sort of ways of doing church the main focus being on worship and experiencing the spirit in that moment rather than evidence and theological based and should we seek to change that of course we're all different and many many people now know much more about personality types than I did when I was growing up you know we've all lots of us have done Myers Briggs or the Enneagram or those things and we now recognize that some kinds of people naturally gravitate towards certain expressions of their faith which leave others cold and I think there is a little bit more mutual respect on that than they used to be and people then used to confuse that with being theologically sound or unsound now Jesus emphasized that we are supposed to love God with our heart and mind and soul and strength and I've often going around different churches I've said to myself these people have got the heart and the soul but I'm not sure about the mind or the strength and these people may have the mind and the strength but it'd be nice if they had some heart and soul and I know some churches that are trying to do all four that's comparatively rare but it seems to that's the aspiration and it's one of the things about being in fellowship with other churches which is what in my tradition in Anglican Darcis would be where you can actually learn from one another and exchange best practice and try out different styles rather than feeling that the way this church has done it is the right way and we're not going to all people.

You describe being a bit uncomfortable in a very charismatic expressive form.

Is that just because you're terribly British and Middle College but I have to know plenty of British people who were born and raised in that tradition are very very comfortable with it but I almost wonder though even whether I felt the power of it I completely felt the power of it. It was an amazing sight and I kind of wished that I could join in to be honest. I mean it was kind of like a you know a nightclub in which the Holy Spirit was was ecstasy but is there not even in the tradition you do enjoy the sort of a more Anglo-Catholic high church tradition let's say there's still something about the emotions that of course speaking to you without the emotion there's nothing.

I mean if it's all just arid yeah but I think as well we're teaching to and fro on basically an 18th and 19th century either or of romantic versus rational. Okay and some people just drift one direction particularly people whose emotions maybe have been bruised for whatever reason of life experience or whatever they find themselves more comfortable in a I'm not saying that to you but people I do know people like that and likewise people whose emotions have been denied for a long time you're not allowed to feel like that you're going to keep a stiff upper lip who then suddenly discover that it's okay to weep to laugh to to shout in prayer. I remember in the reading for Dominion one of the passages that really really struck me was Origen the great third century theologian brilliant scholar absolutely the greatest philosopher of his day the man who perhaps more than anyone else created theology the idea that philosophy can be squared with the the inheritance of Hebrew scripture left this enormous corpus but then he writes every so often I am kind of struck dumb by the idea that the Lord who made the entire universe became a tiny baby and cried for milk and I am so overwhelmed by a sense of this that I know not what to say and I am lost for words and I burst into tears and you think of this kind of brilliant man basically coming up against why Christianity succeeded and why you know Platonism and and all the Greek philosophical schools didn't was because ultimately philosophy is not enough you need that you need that sense and that sense of the you know the the baby Jesus crying in the crib that's something that anyone can get and that's the the essence of an activity played and small children can have it and and that's that's that you know I read that and I thought okay so because obviously I've been wondering you know why was Christianity so successful that for me summed it up is that there's something there philosophers and there's something there for primary school children so question for you then Tom Tom Holland on this one then because a lot of people have been asking in different ways where's Tom Holland at right now well that's that's that's the the question everyone's asking in one form or another and it's coming up in different ways but I remember you telling me a story in a sense you've told us already the intellectual story of your your journey and how you've seen yourself obviously now as is this child of the Christian revolution but we all are at one level whether we call ourselves Christian or not but what have been those emotional moments when something of that story is broken through in a new way I think there was one

moment particularly while you were in the Middle East when you were confronted with the realities of what was happening and somehow something broke through it in a new way yes so I went to Sinjar which was a city a town in northern Iraq that got captured in 2014 by the Islamic State and there was a religious minority called the Yazidis who lived there who were condemned by Islamic State as devil worshipers I mean quite incorrectly and so women notoriously were enslaved and girls as young as eight were enslaved and some of the men were crucified and I went to this town shortly after its liberation and the Islamic State fighters were kind of a mile or so across no man's land so within more to range and I felt a kind of overwhelming sense of what the Christian revolution had wrought to be in the presence of people who would cheerfully have crucified me or done worse if they got hold of me for whom the cross was what it had been for the Romans an emblem of torture an expression of their power and that really did kind of open up for me a kind of existential style of this as I suddenly realized just I mean how deeply Christian I was but that's in the cultural terms I think you you mean you know in a more kind of spiritual sense yes okay so a couple I've mentioned this before I think I may even talked about it when we talked before but it was I went with to the church that I'd gone to as a child and I mentioned how disgracefully that I'd been in the choir and I went there very early and basically there was no choir there were about eight people kind of huddled in what had been the choirs tools and it seemed expressive of decline and and failure and I kind of thought this is going to be really kind of depressing and vicar arrived and it was a woman who didn't look like she didn't look like I remembered a vicar so didn't look like this guy who the vicar who had been one of the few which kind of I realized was kind of my you know in the abstract and I thought oh you know what's this going to be like it was amazing it was the most brilliant sermon I'd ever heard it was it was you know talking about Pentecostified it was like fire had descended on her there's an artist Thomas poem about where he he described some you know fire came here and everyone was kind everything was changed that's what it felt like and I you know it was kind of the essence of the Protestant tradition I guess the idea that that a great preacher can spark fire within within you and I've kept what she said on that day kind of very close to me and I kind of warm my hands with it and I'll tell you another thing that that that I found emotionally and spiritually satisfying and I apologize this is about history again that's fine but but over the course of the pandemic I've been going on increasingly insanely long walk so to London and I've begun to do historically themed ones so I've I did a Roman one I've done a medieval one I did a two to one but I also did an anglic accent one and I went I walked from Brixton via Woolwich up to barking and those who have any familiarity with London geography that's quite a long way and barking was the center of a great Abbey great convent as well great center of female learning it was where it was it was the great center of female scholarship in in medieval England and of course got closed and destroyed in the in the Reformation but that Abbey owned all Hallows by the Towish as the name suggests is by the Tower of London so I walked from barking to all Hallows I think it's about 10 miles I mean quite a long way not a very pleasant route but it had the quality of a pilgrimage and I'd arranged

for the vicar was going to meet me and open up her church to show me the church and she took me up for for for for tea which I really needed by that point so I was kind of you know very grateful for that and then she showed me this icon that she'd done she she commissioned which was of the of the first abbess of barking Abbey holding medicinal plants because she'd been a great healer and saying you know we we want to re-establish contact with that memory because she was a woman who healed in a time of plague and again I felt the kind of the strange the dissolution of the of the centuries in the millennia and and think the only really the church can do this you know only an institution that old can achieve these kind of effects so I suppose those are two you know the the the Protestant sense of sudden fire that I got with this sermon and then with that the sense of this kind of deep time where where the past and the present suddenly seem kurtermanous and you know there's a kind of strangeness and a power there that I feel the great change over the past year over the past few years process of writing dominion has been to open me up to the strangeness of those experiences you've taken you said that as you said on a show recently with me you've you've had to take the safety lock off a bit yes taking a look I was just talking about this with Thomas said it said it's a bit like you know the the gearstick has been stuck and I've wrenched it out and now it's kind of been neutral and I'm not quite sure which way it's gonna go but but it is it I appreciate you sharing so very honestly it is good good of you because I know I passed you every time you come on so give us an update Tom where you at I mean at the core of this story Tom Wright is the claim the frankly still by people like Alice Roberts crazy claim that somebody came back to life that Jesus specifically and I think there's a number of different questions that come in along these lines but here's one which is put in quite an interesting way he just wants to know look if you if someone had stuck a video camera outside the empty tomb on each today we didn't have picked up the risen Jesus walking out they're essentially asking was it literally that physical was it literally like that yes I mean video cameras are funny things and I remember when when Malcolm Muggeridge went to see Mother Teresa in Calcutta and interviewed her they weren't allowed to put proper lights for the television cameras in because the patients it would have been bad for the patients but in fact when they shot it anyway and when it came out there was this kind of lovely ethereal ethereal light in which you could see and nobody had any explanation for it and this has been written up I mean this is maybe it's a modern urban legend or something but but funny so in other funny things happen and saying video camera empty tomb yes or no is is I think an over rationalization of it however empty tomb yes had there been a body of Jesus in there before yes was there a body of Jesus in there now no there wasn't did people soon afterwards see somebody who they recognized as Jesus not least by the mark of the nails in his hands yes they did if as many have tried to say these stories were made up much later they simply wouldn't look like that we know the text switch Jews at the time would use to talk about resurrection like Daniel chapter 12 many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake or like Ezekiel 37 the dry bones etc the resurrection stories in the gospels are simply not the sort of thing that you'd get if you had that sort of expectation and then a decade or

two later decided to fantasize stories about Jesus they're very very odd stories my former colleague in Oxford Ed Saunders who was very far from being any sort of conservative Christian he said of those stories it looks as though the writers are trying very hard to say something they knew happened but for which they knew they didn't have very good language and here you see I would take issue with the way the question was raised in terms of Jesus coming back to life because in a sense yes but actually the whole emphasis of the story see Lazarus comes back to life in John chapter 11 Jesus raises him from the dead he comes back into ordinary mortal life and he is again vulnerable to attack or whatever the widow's son at nane or Jairus' daughter in Mark's gospel they come back into life and they have to live their life and one day they will die Jesus the whole emphasis of the story is is stranger than that he seems to have gone through death and out the other side into a new mode of physicality for which there was no precedent and of which there remains no subsequent example although through the spirit the things that the church does in terms of education medicine healing care for the poor etc and the way the church behaves in terms of of patience humility chastity charity the the virtues which the ancient pagan world didn't value but the Christians did these are signs of new creation which go with resurrection so so we have to be careful then what happens with the video camera yes I think Jesus is certainly alive again but he now belongs equally in heaven and on earth and sometimes they are transparent to one another and sometimes they aren't that's very difficult for us because we're brought up as basically split-level people heavens a long way up there we're down here you're either in the one or the other but as I said before in the Jewish tradition heaven and earth come together in the temple and the whole point of early Christianity is that what the temple was a signpost towards has been realized in Jesus that demands that you see the danger is otherwise we come to the Jesus questions with a set of categories that we've got from somewhere else and try to squash Jesus into them and part of the whole fun and frustration of thinking Christianly is to put Jesus into the middle of the picture and say everything else is going to have to be rearranged around him and that it seems to me is part of what is entailed by saying Jesus Christ is Lord I mean you've sort of answered it but Roger you can be very brief on this he's asking a similar question how should we explain the physical mechanics of the resurrection I mean do we not even bother to try well you just say God is the creator and this is not a random bit of of oddity like somebody doing a stupid miracle and making a pig fly or something like that this is as C.S. Lewis said in his book on miracles this is these are miracles of new creation which are consonant with and fulfilling of the promise which is latent in the old creation that's why elsewhere I've argued that actually and there's a wonderful line from Ludwig Wittgenstein where he says it is love that believes the resurrection and my construal of that is that the resurrection of Jesus is God the creator giving to the creation that sense of affirmation the created world is good and is to be restored rather than in Plato at best shabby and to be left behind I seem to remember one of your predecessors in Durham saying the resurrection shouldn't be seen as a conjuring trick with bones yes and some people took that to mean oh he doubts the resurrection that it was physical but I don't

think that's really what was meant I never had that conversation with David I knew him a bit he was a master at saying two or three things that sort of slid against one another and were designed to tease people into fresh thought which they often did and bless him he was a lovely warmhearted man I think he meant alas that if the resurrection stories had involved a body it would have been a conjuring trick with bones but because God doesn't do conjuring tricks it can't have been I think that's what he meant but I'm honestly not right I mean another question here from Tim sort of I think sort of wants to take it one step further in what senses Jesus alive today and I think we're coming up to a centuries Sunday are we? A century day was two days ago and so tomorrow where we're recording this on this way that's going on live but this is the Saturday before or the Sunday after Ascension Day right okay Ascension Day is always the first day so so so I mean that's you know in Acts that's the next part of the story but if you know it's often a sort of Christian cliché almost Jesus is alive in what sense is Jesus alive asked Tim? The short answer Tim is that he's just as alive as you are in fact a lot more so that Jesus' aliveness is a heaven and earth aliveness Jesus is present usually hidden though if he wants to make himself visible I have one close friend who is absolutely convinced that that he actually met Jesus physically on one occasion it's not up to me to say God can't do that God can do whatever God wants so but the presence of Jesus is a wonderful mysterious sometimes almost one what's their delicate thing beckoning consoling warning etc just like a wise good friend would be and there are places where we can meet him where he's promised to meet with his people like in the scriptures and in the breaking of the bread as at the end of Luke's Gospel but he'll meet us in other ways and places as well how does that then relate to the promise that he will come again he will come again because when in the end heaven and earth will no longer be separated by the thin veil we were talking about thin places earlier places where heaven and earth seem to be almost transparent to one another and and the coming again it's interesting in the New Testament sometimes it uses the language of coming as of travel other times it uses the language of appearing there's two or three passages Colossians 3 1 John 3 and 1 to others which seem to imply that there is a sort of screen between us and the heavenly reality and one day the screen will be removed and we'll discover what was there all along like Elisha and his servant Lord open his eyes and suddenly the mountain is full of horses and chariots so far round about the prophet you know just when we were getting scared so then that is part of the great promise as in Romans 8 and other passages that creation itself the whole creation will be set free from its present bondage to decay and Jesus himself as the Lord of creation will be personally present in that new world quite what that'll look like we don't have good imagery and the book of Revelation uses this wild fantastic imagery almost as a way of saying don't take this literally but these are signposts towards something for which we don't have good language let's have one more resurrection question this is quite an interesting one doesn't leave a name here but but else why did Jesus not appear to any of his enemies or at least those who were influential in his crucifixion after he rose from the dead I mean I guess if he appeared to Pilate you know maybe that would would have sort of sealed the deal for the

Christian church argue maybe you didn't Pilate had his eyes shut I mean there are stories out there in the Ethiopian church are there in the well that was just a vision but actually Paul was convinced that he had seen Jesus with his own eyes you know because that's what constitutes him an apostle an apostle is for Paul somebody who has seen the risen Jesus the danger with asking why why did God to do X rather than Y why didn't God do A rather than B is that that implies that we know antecedently something about the mind of God into which we can then put bits and pieces of the Jesus story whereas the New Testament set again insists that it's the other way around that it's only as we look at Jesus John says nobody has ever seen God but the only begotten son has revealed him has made him known that's the way around it has to be which is why looking at and praying to and invoking and enjoying the presence of Jesus has to be at the center of all the reflection on everything else

[Music] Well we're going to call time on today's show just there and next week we'll play out the rest of the questions that came in in a part two of this live ask anti-write anything show that we recorded at Unbelievable 2021 you can find out more about our show find further videos and how to ask a question yourself and other resources by registering over at askentiright.com and again get all of the sessions in high definition video from the conference page at unbelievable.live see you next time