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#131 Help! I'm on the brink of atheism... Deconstruction and suffering

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom offers advice to two people struggling with their faith. One is having doubts during a period of deconstruction, the other can't get past the problem of suffering.

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Transcript

[Music] The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

[Music] Welcome back. I'm Justin Briley and this is the show from Premier Unbelievable, bringing you a regular dose of Tom Wright's Thinking and Theology, where you get to ask the questions.

And today, Tom offers advice to two people struggling with their faith. One is having doubts during a period of deconstruction, and the other can't get past the problem of suffering. Well, before we jump in, I just had to read this review of the podcast that got left recently.

It begins rather ominously, "Please be warned," but continues. Be careful who you listen

to this podcast with. I started listening to this podcast with a friend, and fell deeply in love with Tom, Justin, and this friend.

Soon, that friend and I got married and took our honeymoon in the UK just to stop by a conference to see Tom. And we hope to see you just in one day soon. And to thank him.

Just be careful is all I'm saying. Just to all of you, we can't get enough and have some great theology and a great marriage to thank you both for. Much love, Anna and Renelle from Canada.

Well, there you go. Ask NTY Ride to match making now. So lovely to hear that story, Anna and Renelle.

Thank you for leaving a review via Apple Podcast, and you can do so too, wherever you're listening to the podcast from. It helps others to discover the show. By the way, if you haven't already discovered them, we have a bunch of other great podcasts from the premier unbelievable staple.

Our mothership, as it were, is the unbelievable show where I bring Christians and non-Christians together for weekly dialogue and debate. It includes episodes of our big conversation series as well. There's also the C.S. Lewis podcast with Alistom McGrath.

We recently visited some of C.S. Lewis' best known short works and essays on that one. The Matters of Life and Death podcast is a treasure trove of wisdom on issues around science, biology, technology with bioethics expert Dr. John Wyatt. And our newest upstart of a podcast is Unapologetic.

And that's recently seen Lee Strobel, John Lennox, Lisa Fields and Derwin Gray in conversation with me on evangelism and apologetics. So they're all available now at our website, premierunbelievable.com. Do check them out at the link with today's podcast and do enjoy today's edition of this show.

[Music] Well, on today's show and next week, we're going to be looking at some more sort of pastoral questions, but particularly from people who are really struggling with faith on the brink of atheism almost.

And we will just repeat, though, something we've often said, whenever we take pastoral questions, which is that neither I or Tom are in a position to be anybody's pastor via podcast. So it's always worth finding wise counsel wherever you are in order to help you work through any question like this. But we will do what we can in addressing the general issues that are presented in some of these stories.

And we'll just take a couple of these on today's and next week's episode, Tom, just to give us a bit of time to try and short approach these issues. Well, let's start with Elijah, who says he needs help rebooting. Elijah is in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Says, "I'm a senior in high school who could really, really use some help growing up in a Christian household and having made my faith my own very early on in life. I've had a pretty steady faith for the past decade, and I've been labelled as a mature Christian by my family and some of my congregation. I say this not to boast, but to show you the severity of my situation, because in the past year and a half, I've been confronted by a plethora of new revelations that have caused a shift in my trust in God.

I began to accept evolution, shifted my view of the Bible with it. This then calls me to look more in depth into the history of the Bible, its making, styles, its languages, and my lay research shifted my beliefs even more. This on its own isn't the problem.

However, it did fuel the problem. When COVID hit, I began to interact with critical mentors and companions of the faith and those outside it, less and less. And I made the critical mistake of taking in a surge of atheist ideas in isolation.

This paired with the shifting ideas in my mind called a toxic intellectual inwardness, which controlled my thoughts. Started reading Peter ends and I thought I love his work, but it's uprooted some of my foundational beliefs without walking me through any spiritual process of comfort and confidence, and I find myself doubting everything I knew. Well, this paired with a move to a new church and habitual sin in my life has caused me to distance myself from God in a fog of confusion and chaos.

I can't any longer confidently say that Jesus died for my sins, rose again, gave us the Holy Spirit, reading the Bible, praying and going to church have all become disinteresting at best and frustrating at worst, though I still do them. And this lack of structure has caused sin to scratch at my door more fiercely. But I don't want this to be the case.

I desperately want the deep shalom of God, but I keep finding myself at dead ends, seemingly abandoned. "What I need is a reboot," says Elijah. "Do you know any books, pastors, sermons, anything that can help me in this situation?" I haven't listened to all your podcasts, so if you've covered this in a previous episode, I should probably listen to it.

But I'm currently meeting with my youth pastor once a week and starting to build some friendships in my new church. However, I know only Christ can speak a word of peace to abate this storm. He just doesn't seem to be doing that right now.

Thanks so much for all you do. Gosh, well, I'm sure there's more to Elijah's story than even what he's told us there, Tom. But where would you begin with someone like Elijah? As it stands, he's actually still quite young as a senior in high school.

But obviously coming to a crunch point where lots of new ideas have started to sort of make him question aspects of the faith he grew up with. And indeed, obviously, he feels like his relationship with God has gone cold and distant, and he finds it really hard to

connect any longer in this new situation. So, yeah, where would you begin? Goodness.

Yeah, my heart goes out to Elijah, and he writes so sensitively and quite materially. I mean, he uses the word "mature" that other people have used of him, and I can see why they would say that. Because he's obviously thought quite deeply around a lot of his views, etc.

From some points of view, I want to say, great, you're in your presumably late teens, the senior in high school means sort of 16, 17, something like that. I think, presumably- Yeah, I think so. Yeah, probably 18, 19, 19, 19, 19, 19, 19, 19, 19.

I would say I wish that more 16, 17-year-olds were as eager for intellectual inquiry in parallel with and perhaps joined up with spiritual maturing as Elijah seems to be. And the intellectual inquiry is a necessary part of the growing up process. Jesus taught us to love God with our minds, and that certainly doesn't mean paying no attention, whatever, to lines of thought that might seem to go in opposite directions towards atheism, whatever.

He doesn't say which atheist authors he's been reading, nor does he say what it is about Pete Enz's work, which he finds attractive but disturbing, because I know Pete a bit, and I know Pete has written a lot of very interesting stuff which some people have found difficult. But I think at the heart of it is that I sense that Elijah's home faith, if I can put it like that, the faith of his family, the faith of the church that he grew up in, may have included all sorts of things like a sharp distinction between creation and evolution and so on, which may actually need to be revisited. And the trick is then to discover which things actually do matter, which things are central, which things are non-negotiable, and which things are actually things that different bits of the church, not least in North America but also in my country as well, have boosted up as though they were part of the faith but they aren't in fact.

And so as I've often said, the critical thing is to tell the difference between the things that make a difference and the things that don't make a difference. And certainly when he mentioned the question of evolution, as I said in a previous podcast, we have to distinguish sharply between biological evolution, which seems to me a scientifically validated reality. And I know that some people will bridle at that, but I really believe that's the case.

And evolutionism, which is a worldview, which is a way of looking at the world as though God doesn't exist. Biological evolution doesn't tell you that. And the trouble was that the people who are pushing biological evolution in the 18th and 19th century were often doing so because they really believed in evolutionism, which is a modern form of the ancient philosophy called Epicureanism, which says God is outside the picture, so the world just makes itself under its own steam.

Now that is a very exciting doctrine for some people politically. Many of the modern

democratic movements grew out of that. And that should be chased through and thought through, as I've tried to do in my work, and many others have tried to do.

But that isn't the same as saying actually biological evolution is a reality, and it shouldn't disturb a basic, robust faith in God, the good and wise creator. It needs to be thought through as we've tried to do in this podcast and elsewhere. But so that just as one example, it may well be that there are many things in the original childhood faith with which Elijah has grown up, which need then to be, to have their cages rattled a bit and say, do we really, is that really what the Bible is teaching? And I have found throughout the last 50, 60 years really since I started taking these issues seriously myself, that again and again, things which many Christians have believed and have regarded as core doctrines of the faith, when you really get into the Bible deeply, they didn't, they don't mean exactly what different later Christian traditions have imagined they mean.

And anyone who knows my work knows that I've chased that through in terms of Pauline theology and so on. I would say to Elijah, don't be afraid of historical study of scripture. Have a look at that book that Mike Bird and I did the New Testament in its world, because it's been my experience and that of many others that the more you understand scripture within its own historical and cultural context, the more it comes up in three dimensions and speaks directly to our three-dimensioned life, whereas so much older biblical study was rather two-dimensional.

Here is a bit of the Bible, here's the doctrine it teaches, just simply carry it over and plonk it down as though there was nothing problematic about that. So I think there is a question of maturing here and maturing through and it's a matter of patience. The fact that I can't solve this problem today or maybe even this year shouldn't be a reason to stop praying in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The fact that I don't understand how this bit of the Bible got written or what it originally meant doesn't mean that I can't read it literally or metaphorically on my knees and ask God to have a fresh word to say to me through it. I very much endorsed just in what you said in introducing this session that you and I cannot be pastors on a Zoom call or a podcast or whatever and I was delighted when Elijah said that he's been meeting regularly with his youth pastor and he ought to push his youth pastor, you know, on this. I've got these questions.

Can you help me? Do you know of books which will help me in where I am right now? I personally now meet on right. Don't know of the right books necessarily to recommend him, but hopefully his youth pastor will have access to resources. But also Elijah needs to explore other ways of praying, that ways like the meditation where you take one story from the gospels and you spend half an hour with it and you ask Jesus to give you a sense of his presence in the story and of your presence as a spectator and then a participant in the story or of the kind of prayer where you take one verse of scripture,

maybe one of the greetings graced to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and spend time with that repeating it over and over with the rhythm of your breathing and just being open to whatever God is saying to you because we all need to grow up in our praying and as we grow up in other ways that may mean wearing different clothes, it may mean taking on different styles of what we're supposed to do now and that doesn't mean that all ways of praying are equally helpful for all people.

It does mean that most of us in our teens probably need to be moving out into the larger traditions of Christian spirituality within which our particular personalities may find more help than where we started. Those would be just for starters, ways of praying, ways of reading the Bible but plugging in regularly with a wise pastor who won't be afraid to face the questions. And if I could add something as well Elijah, sometimes what Elijah described here is commonly these days called deconstruction, you know being in a very settled sort of form of belief or faith and then suddenly having it all pulled apart and it all seems to sort of fall into different pieces on the floor.

But having said that I know so many people who've gone through that and before it was ever called deconstruction, they've gone through a similar process but have reconstructed and have actually come out with something stronger, more mature, deeper ultimately and it often does involve some of those ideas, assumptions being questioned but then actually being reframed and realizing that Christianity is bigger than my local expression of it was perhaps when I grew up and that sort of thing. And if I can recommend again to Elijah some of those early podcasts we did where we tackled quite similar questions to this Tom, there'll be lots more fruitful thoughts there I think for Elijah to dig into but yeah thank you so much that was really helpful. Let's move on to another question here from Kevin in Toledo, Ohio.

This is on suffering specifically and Kevin says I really enjoy the podcast, the insights have been so refreshing for someone raised in a very literalist and fundamentalist version of the Christian faith and now find myself in my 30s but drifting more towards some kind of deism or perhaps even atheism. I struggle heavily with the problem of suffering and I wonder if I could get your thoughts on the humanity of God. We make a lot of God's compassion and human-like nature as expressed through the life of Jesus.

But to me sometimes it seems like whatever God is he or should I say it is very inhuman in nature. I look at the suffering in the world that God witnesses every day whether it's people affected by illness or natural disasters or violence and I don't understand how any human being could not be moved to intervene swiftly and definitively. I feel like any human mind that seeing the things God has seen and apparently allows them to happen would have surely been driven mad long ago.

I know it's a bit of a pessimistic question but I would very much appreciate your thoughts. That's from Kevin. This is a question that so many people struggle with, Tom,

but at this moment in his life it's the one that's really weighing on Kevin.

How can God allow this? Where do you begin for someone like him? It's a classic question but it does come out of precisely the the daest world of the 18th century. There's no surprise that Kevin is obviously very self-aware about this, realizes that daest ancestry as it were because of course the problem of suffering has been with the church from the beginning. The early Christians knew all about people with extraordinary incurable diseases, people who died young, people whose children died soon after birth.

They were aware of massive earthquakes and floods and tornadoes and goodness knows what, which ravaged communities and through which people died. It's very interesting that this only becomes a theological problem as it were in basically the 18th century, precisely when God is being thought of as a kind of celestial manager or chief executive officer and then in the famous phrase of Woody Allen, I believe in God but he seems to be a bit of an underachiever. In other words, he isn't getting it right.

If God really was running the show, this stuff shouldn't be happening. And as Kevin says very sensitively, if he's observing all this stuff, surely he would move swiftly and powerfully to put it all right. I think the problem with that is that it does assume this God and world as though the question of Jesus and the Spirit weren't there anywhere.

And from the beginning, the Christian faith is not about a God who's in charge of the world, oh, and then by the way, he sent Jesus to deal with our sin, but is about the mystery of a God who made the world in such a way that it would work properly through human agency. And then when humans mess up, all sorts of things happen as a result. We've discussed that on other podcasts, of course, the question of the fall and how that plays out.

But then the question is, when we look at the God who we see in Jesus, we do see a God of extraordinary compassion. And indeed, the idea of a compassionate God only really comes to us through the scriptural witness in the Old Testament as well. Think of Isaiah, think of the Psalms.

Two, the God who we then see fully revealed in Jesus, who reaches out and touches the leper, who says to people, don't be afraid and don't cry and so on. But what we are seeing is God working in the world supremely through the human being, Jesus, and then by his spirit, giving people the call to become healing, compassionate people themselves. In other words, the way that God made the world was not so that if anything went wrong, he could just snap his fingers and say, oh, no, that wasn't what I meant.

Let's quit and do it differently. God has made the world in a particular way. Now, one might say, well, if I were God, I would do it differently.

Well, good luck with that one. The only reason we Christians think we have any handle

on who God is, is because of what we see in Jesus. And then the question is, how is God now bringing healing and hope and justice and mercy to the world? And that's the ongoing question of the work of the kingdom of God.

And interestingly, from the 18th century, deist perspective, it was that ongoing work of the kingdom of God, which people didn't want to know about because they were saying, God is out of the picture. We're going to run the world our way. Thank you very much.

Whereas for centuries, the church had been in the forefront of healing and hope of doing medicine, of doing education, of caring for the poor. Instead of suffering being an intellectual problem about whether God's in charge, suffering was the practical challenge to the people who were invoking God's Holy Spirit to go and get stuck in and do something about it. In other words, here's the real reset we need to do to address 18th century dayism for what it is, which was an attempt to squeeze Jesus out of the picture and to try to imagine a God in the world synergy without Jesus.

And to answer that, we have to say, let's put Jesus and the Spirit back in and see what happens. That is, of course, to raise massive other questions as well. But that's at least the first move that I would want to make.

Well, again, there may be other episodes where we've tackled these again in more detail, the issue of suffering. If you go back in the back catalogue, Kevin, you may find some helpful questions and answers there as well. But both yourself, Kevin and Elijah are both obviously dealing with big questions that cannot be summarised in just a 20 minute podcast.

But we hope that there's been at least the starting point of maybe starting to grapple with that and really digging into faith because ultimately, it's called faith for a reason, I suppose. It's trusting in the God we do know for the things we often don't understand in the moment. Thank you very much for the Kevin's and the Elijah's of this world and all the questions that they bring to us.

We'll have more of them on next week's show. We're going to continue with people's tough questions about faith. People are struggling in their faith in one way or another.

So do join us again for that at the same time. But for now, thanks for being with me, Tom. Thank you.

Well, next week we'll be picking up more of your pastoral and intellectual questions that listeners are struggling with, such as, "Is the Bible anti-women and does God hear the prayers of agnostics?" For more from the show, to ask your question and to get loads of bonus content and a free ebook, do make sure to register for our newsletter at premierunbelievable.com. Thank you so much for being with us today. God bless you and see you next time.

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