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#112 How do I pray for Ukraine?

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom shares his thoughts on the Ukraine conflict and answers listener questions on how to pray for Ukraine and whether such events are evidence of the 'end times'.

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Transcript

[Music] The #AskNTYanything podcast.

[Music] Hello and welcome back. This is Justin, and the show brought to you in partnership with NT-Right Online, SBCK and Premier Unbelievable, where I'm head of theology and apologetics.

Well, Tom and I were able to sit down just this week to talk about the crisis in Ukraine and answer some of the questions that have come in over the last month about it. Hope you find today's edition of the podcast helpful. Glad to announce also that we have a new website for the show.

Ask NT-Right Anything is now part of premierunbelievable.com. There you can find all our shows and resources in the one place, and the website will be expanding considerably in coming months as we head towards the official launch of this new apologetics and theology ministry Premier Unbelievable in May at the time of our annual

conference. But for now, you can sign up to the premier unbelievable newsletter for news about this show and our other shows and resources. You'll get a free ebook if you do that on the scientific and philosophical evidence for God from William Lane Craig.

That's premierunbelievable.com, and of course, signing up still gets you that link to ask a question of Tom. Now, if you've got questions about faith, Unbelievable the conference 2022 on Saturday the 14th of May, live from the British Library, maybe just the thing for you. You can actually attend from anywhere in the world.

Our theme is God Unmuted, helping the church find its authentic voice again. We're going to be talking about the divided politicized culture we live in and how Christians can speak with grace and truth into that. Some wonderful speakers joining us on the day.

Alistom McGrath, Lisa Fields, Glenn Scrivener, Sharon Dierich, Joseph DeSouza, John Wyatt, Phil Vicious, Sky Jatani. And we've also added recently to the bill Jeff Vines and Calvin Robinson, two really interesting speakers. It's a really diverse lineup.

And I think you're really going to enjoy the panel Q&A, the sessions that are brought. And you'll be able to, of course, be part of our big conversation live event as part of that the same evening. Dr Ian McGill-Christian renowned brain psychologist in conversation with Christian neuroscientist Sharon Dierichs on The Mind and Its Master.

So if you want more, you want to get yourself booked in unbelievable dot live. That's the link for the conference. You can also find the link for our new website with the podcast today as well.

For now, let's get into your questions. Well, welcome back to the show and today on the program. For the first time that we've really been able to sit down together in a little while, Tom, we wanted to take this opportunity to talk about the Ukraine conflict in particular, which at the time of recording has been going on for about a month or so.

Tell me sort of your thoughts generally on this tragic conflict, Tom. I suppose no one necessarily expected that Putin would go in. And when we did, we were all slightly in a state of shock, I think including people in the Ukraine.

But what were your overall thoughts and feelings and prayers as that unfolded? Yes, it's been a terrifying time. And I've been in regular, almost daily touch with a colleague who normally teaches at the University in Lviv in Western Ukraine. And she and her children have joined the tide of refugees.

And she's now in Poland in a safe place there. She has carefully not mentioned her husband, but I'm assuming that he has had to stay behind along with all the other men and continue the defense of their country. But so I've been getting these regular bulletins and they've been kind of lively and energetic, but also deeply prayerful.

And so I've been horrified day by day, but glad to have a source other than just the newspapers and the what comes up on YouTube or whatever, although that sometimes is quite compulsive viewing. And I try to try both to stand back and to be plunged in, plunged in in terms simply of prayer that as we pray, we stand before God with this on our hearts, like Aaron with the children of Israel on his breastplate. All we can do is to come into the presence of God and say, here it is.

We have no idea what to do. It's actually not a bad place to be in prayer. And I've often on this show talked about Romans 8, where we don't know what to pray for as we ought and we have to pray in the spirit and allow the spirit to groan within us with inarticulate groanings.

And if we think we can instantly articulate and say, this is what God is doing, etc, etc. As with the pandemic a couple of years ago, when we talked about that, then we're probably manipulating God or scaling down the sense of the horror of what's actually happening. Because I think we are seeing a kind of chaos come again, a kind of a bit of the world going back to being without form and void in Hebrew, Tohuwabohu.

Because what we thought was a relatively stable geopolitical order, okay, with some difficult bits here and there, etc, has now revealed itself to be totally unstable and it's like living in an ongoing earthquake where there's nothing that you can regard as a fixed point really anymore in that whole region. Of course, as people have been reminding us, we should have felt that about Syria. And it's a very interesting question to why we didn't feel it about Syria.

We should have felt it about several places. We should still be feeling it about Afghanistan, for goodness sake. And going back further, we should have felt it about Vietnam, because a lot of what we see happening with Putin's Russian troops doing what they're doing has some very uncomfortable analogies with what America did in Vietnam.

And not being an American, I'm not pointing the finger, I'm just saying as we look back. And then of course, particularly the British in their long period of empire had all kinds of ways of making life extremely uncomfortable for people who tried to rebel against our British empire. And that has a long history going way back.

So it's not a matter of saying everybody else in the world is really, really, really, really, really good. And unfortunately, there's one horrible man in Russia who's really rather evil. It's a matter of shades of gray.

And in a sense, we've all participated in that. But that isn't in any way, of course, to say, Oh, well, that doesn't matter then, because it really does matter. And part of the problem is that we've had for a generation or more now throughout all my life, this thing called the United Nations, which is supposed to bring together, particularly the most powerful nations, to say we must never again allow the sort of things that happened in

the Second World War.

And unfortunately, two of the people who hold seats on the security council are Russia and China. And what's that going to do when it comes then to a discussion of what ought to be done? Because you can't send a UN peacekeeping force in when two of the main people who basically steer the UN, or supposedly so, would not be willing to see that happen. And the fact that Putin hasn't called it a war that he's just called it a military operation, well, the Vietnam War was never declared.

That was just Lyndon Johnson sending some troops to sort out some problems. And then he sent some more, and then he sent some more, et cetera, et cetera. So unfortunately, when you look at it in even a comparatively modern perspective, let alone going back to the 19th century, you see that we just don't have a good template for how to do wise, healthy geopolitics.

And of course, we're talking about the fault line between East and West. And where does that fault line exactly lie? And Ukraine is right on that strip from the Baltic to the Black Sea, which was known as the the Pale, where many of the Jews of Russia lived. And it's been a fault line for a long time.

And again, that isn't to excuse or explain. It's just to say, Lord have mercy. This is where we are.

And particularly then to say, how come these countries which have a long tradition of a particular kind of Christian faith and worship, some of which has resulted in remarkable saintliness, remarkable lives of prayer and humility and service? Think of somebody like Anthony Bloom, a Russian Archbishop, and all that he has taught us. How did it happen that from within that matrix, this terrible thing would occur? And that then takes you back to the question of Putin's own theology, if that's what you call it, of a greater Russia or the ancient Holy Roosts, which is crazy and Belarus, which play a very prominent part. And unfortunately, I mean, there was an article in one of the newspapers the other day about Patriarch Kirill, the President Russian Orthodox Patriarch, who I think I've actually met him at a meeting the World Council churches a long time ago, because he was a regular member of Russian Orthodox delegations to the WCC and elsewhere, because he was a regular KGB man.

And he was an associate of Putin's from way back when. And so together, they form a pretty toxic combination. So there's all sorts of things going on there.

And again, that's not to say that in the past, there weren't prelates here in England who were supporting a war effort or whatever it may be. It's just to say, we don't seem to have grown up. We don't seem to be thinking Christianly about what ought to be done longer term, not just to solve the present crisis, but how we should together be thinking and praying in order to try to make this world a place of justice and mercy, instead of a

place of horror, as it is at the moment.

So that's just to walk around the question. But I think we need to factor in all those and much more, if we're to be wise and reflecting on it. Just briefly, before we get to a couple of questions sent in by listeners of the show on this, coming to the issue of the Russian Orthodox Church, I think just recently, Ron Williams suggested that there may be a case for expelling the Russian Orthodox Church from the World Council of Churches.

Evidently, there is some kind of symbiosis between Putin and Kyril, and however warped the religious ideology of Putin is, it doesn't seem to be being discouraged exactly by Kyril. So what are your thoughts on that whole issue? Yes, I didn't see that thing by Ron Williams. I did see that he had a letter in the Times about three weeks ago saying, "Please can the Russian hierarchy put pressure on Putin?" But maybe they have responded to him and said, "No, we're actually supporting him." So I'm not sure what effect it would have really to expel them from the WCC.

It's a sort of moral sanction. They might just shrug their shoulders and say, "Oh, well, you're a bunch of hopeless Western liberals anyway," or words of that effect. But the more signals we can send to that community at large, that what is going on is totally out of line.

Of course, part of the problem is the information that there's an awful lot of people in Russia who simply don't know what's going on because they're just being fed their own state propaganda. So the more that the message can get through, and perhaps through the multiple channels where clergy in the West are friends with or have long associations with clergy in the East, the more we can explain what's actually happening on the ground, the better. Well, let's turn to a couple of the questions that have come in on this since the conflict came about.

Omar is in Sydney, Australia, and says, "I'd love to know what is Tom's thinking about the New World Order prophecies since the start of the war between Russia and Ukraine. I've heard more and more prophecies, especially in American circles, saying that this is the beginning of a New World Order taking over this new order allegedly made up by countries like Russia, China, and Iran, and that it could destroy the free world, wage war on Israel, lead to the Armageddon, and so on. Do you see any truth in these prophecies? Is the book of Revelation and allegory where every symbol equals something? Or are these prophecies simply misguided or crazy? How can we address people who believe in them? Often, I find myself with a lack of language when addressing these kinds of claims and prophecies.

What's your thoughts, Tom? Yeah, I think when things seem to be descending into chaos as they have been doing, it's only natural that people try to reach out for some sort of framework within which to make sense of things. And that's a very natural thing. I think we, in a sense, we all do it.

But this idea of it's all in the book of Revelation, or it's all in Daniel, or Ezekiel, or somewhere, the short answer to that is people say this every time there's any kind of a crisis in my, not very long, a lifetime, maybe 70 years. I've seen it again and again. And people said this at the start of this Cold War.

People said it way back. Actually, in the 20s and 30s, people were saying it about the rise of Hitler and so on. And I don't want to say that God isn't sovereign over all of this.

I don't want to say that God isn't working his purpose out. I think that to short circuit that, which is really a question, what does this mean? To short circuit that question to say, ah, this is what it is. It's all prophesied in Revelation.

It's going to be Russia and Iran and whoever. And they're going to do this little all end up in Armageddon. That simply plays into a modern mythology of, eschatology, of the final things.

And the whole end times industry, which is very much an American industry, will crank up into action again. And yet one more time, people will say, ah, now we know that in fact the rapture is going to occur at such and such a time and Armageddon is going to occur at such and such a time. We've been there so many times before.

That doesn't mean that there will never ever be a time when dramatic things will happen, but it should warn us against simply hitching ourselves to any one particular frame at the moment. And particularly once you start talking about Armageddon, you start talking about that modern mythology which puts together several individual bits of the Bible, which really don't work like that at all. And I and others have explored that in my book, *Surprised by Hope and Elsewhere*, as you know, that the whole rapture theology is based on a mistake.

Partly because the whole point of Christianity is not how we get up to heaven, but how God comes to dwell with us. And the question we ought to be asking is, in what way is God by his spirit coming to dwell amid his suffering world right now? I suppose my follow up question to Omar's there is, while we shouldn't necessarily see every current crisis and so on in the light of some sort of biblical prophecy, is there any sense in which you do think that world events, national events, nations going to war against nation and so on, ultimately would, even if we don't have the power to see which particular events might foretell that moment in time, but could press the return of Christ in any way, Tom, or is it simply beyond our ken? No, I mean, the classic passages like Mark 13 and Matthew 24, which are themselves often misinterpreted, but they make it very clear. Jesus says of that day and that are nobody knows, and that Jesus talks about a day which is coming for which there will be signs in advance, which is clearly when you read the text, the destruction of Jerusalem 40 years after his own death, roughly, but then he says there is another time coming for which there will be no signs.

It will be a perfectly ordinary. People will be eating and drinking and marrying and giving in marriage, in other words, life carrying on as normal, and then quite suddenly something will happen. And certainly when the early Christians pick up that theme, Paul particularly talks about the day of the Lord coming like a thief in the night, and the point about the thief in the night is that if you don't, when it was coming, you'd have made sure the door was better locked and barred, so you don't know when it's coming.

So any attempt to say, ah-ha, here are the signs, this is the way it's going, you just can't do it like that. Final question here from Jeff, who wants to know about praying for Ukraine, says, "I just want to ask about how to feel about and pray for world events that seem out of control, as I look at the situation in Ukraine and with Russia showing aggression beyond what we thought was possible in this time and place. It makes me feel very uneasy, heartbroken for the Ukrainian people and their shattered land, as well as concerned about the prospect for peace in the wider world.

My prayer has been that God, by his Holy Spirit, will guide the world and its leaders and keep us from running into dead ends, but I do fear for the safety of the world and the world we're giving our children." And he thought on how to pray and how to feel a peace in the midst of a time of upheaval. I want to rest in God's peace, but I feel guilty just enjoying me when knowing that not far away people's peace is being shattered. And although I know ultimately the world's kings will bow before Jesus, but in here and now it seems like a wild animal has been unleashed from its cage running wild in Central Europe.

And it's about how he's going to go back into that cage, so to speak. It feels like the stakes are so high these days, everything from COVID to politics and now the peace of the world. And I suppose there's just a general, yeah, how do you pray into a situation that seems almost as though it's changing everything and therefore what the prospects for peace are seem almost fantastical in that way, Tom, but yeah, go ahead.

Yeah, I totally get that. I very much resonate with what Jeff says, and I would add to his mix that right in the middle of it all we are being told now by the UN Climate Report that things are even more serious than we thought and we've only got a very short time before our world is going to overheat in a pretty devastating way which will produce in itself a lot more human misery, potential destruction of habitats, etc, etc. So yeah, it's a mess.

Now, I think one of the things we have to remind ourselves is that we today in this last century, even 50 years, we know far, far more of what's going on in the world on a day-by-day basis than any of our predecessors have ever done. I mean, if you imagine Jesus in the Middle East in the first century or Paul traveling around the Mediterranean world, listening to rumors that were going on in the streets and lanes of Corinth or Ephesus or wherever, Paul knew probably a bit more about what was going on than somebody who

only lived in Palestine. However, it was all about wars and rumors of wars and you hear that, oh, some great military leader is trying to do this and there's somebody up north who's going to do that.

It's very interesting that Jeff uses that image of a wild animal being unleashed from its cage because that's precisely the sort of image for which books like Daniel were reaching that here we have monsters which are many headed or many tooth-thaw with lots of claws and so on and they're attacking and so on. This is the only image that people in the ancient world could find to do justice to the sense that suddenly there was an empire from Persia or Egypt or now Rome, whatever, that seemed to be like an enormous monster just devouring everything in its path and there's plenty of passages, think of the book of Hevakkot, for instance, in the Old Testament where you've got similar ideas of vast forces unleashed and there's absolutely nothing we can do about it. From that point of view, the Old Testament is full of prayers for precisely situations like this where we have no means of understanding what has happened, what is happening, what will happen.

All we can do is to say, "Oh Lord, you are from everlasting to everlasting. Will you please watch over us? Will you please do whatever you want to do in this situation by bring rescue, bring healing, bring justice, bring judgment." And that's why it helps me understand why in the Old Testament there is this constant longing for a righteous king who will do justice and mercy. Psalm 72 comes back again and again to my mind and there's wonderful images of peace in Isaiah 11 about the wolf and the lamb lying down together and so on.

This is about the wild animals being tamed and it seems to me that as followers of Jesus we ought to be people who are constantly praying for that ultimate future to come about both eventually and in anticipation in bits and pieces because just as we ourselves are called to be people who live by God's future reign in our personal lives. So corporately we should be seeking ways to say to our leaders, rulers in whatever situation we live that actually there is such a thing as justice, there is such a thing as mercy, there is such a thing as socio-political wisdom and let us together pray and seek for what that's going to mean. Of course previous generations had to face this with the rise of the great powers etc in previous world wars and so on.

We I think have got a bit lazy about this in my generation that have not had to fight a war and so we've kind of assumed that now we've got over all that stuff from the first half of the 20th century the world is just going to rumble on and that'll be all right. So the question then is how to pray in the midst of that and it seems to me that that is precisely what so many of the great biblical prayers are about. Think of Daniel 9 for instance here we are in exile, Jerusalem has been destroyed etc and Daniel prays a prayer of sorrow and hope and kind of reaches out and holds on to God's world and God's people and lays it before God with biblical promises but facing the reality of what's going on.

Now it seems to me that we have to learn how to pray that way both individually privately and collectively we have to facilitate in our worship services times of prayer in which we reach out embrace the pain of the world and hold it in the presence of our loving God. One way in which in the first Iraq war I was then a college chaplain and one of the ways in which I tried to help people to do this was when we had a communion service depending on how many people were there we would gather around the communion table and we would pass the bread from person to person and I remember one occasion suggesting that we each take a step back so that there was a space between each person and the next and instead of just passing the bread straight to the next person I said I want you to imagine one person you've seen on television one person who is grieving one person whose home has been destroyed and I want you to share the bread with them before it passes on to the next person and we'll just take our time and find ways I mean that's just one of many things that one could do ways of unfolding the pain of the world within the gospel message of the broken bread and the outpoured wine which of course symbolizes and embodies and the presence of Jesus crucified and risen and so we need to find creative wise ways of helping one another to pray in perhaps fresh new ways we probably always should have been doing this because there's always crazy stuff going on somewhere in the world it's come home to us in western Europe very particularly recently well I hope that's helped in some way Jeff and for anyone who's seeking to find ways to pray and bring this whole conflict before God as we approach Easter and the cross that is of course something we can do is hold this broken world before a God who was broken for this world thank you Tom for this time together and yeah we will be looking at questions around Easter in the next edition of the show but for now thanks for being with me thank you thank you so much for being with us next time it'll be holy week and we'll be looking at the questions you've sent in about the Easter accounts for instance can we blame Judas if he was predestined to betray Jesus and are there alternative explanations for the resurrection accounts you can of course receive news from the show and ask a question by registering over at our new website premier.unbelievable.com we'll even send you a free ebook when you do that and you're welcome to support the show from there as well just a reminder go to unbelievable.live to check out ticketing for unbelievable the conference in May helping you take God off mute in your life the link is with today's show along with the link for the new website for now thanks for being with with us and see you next time. [Silence]