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#16 Tom answers questions on prayer

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

What's the point of prayer if God knows our needs? Can we claim 'anything' by faith in Jesus name? What do Tom's prayer habits look like?

These and more listener questions get addressed by Tom Wright in this episode.

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Transcript

[Music] - Premier Podcast.

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[Music] Hello, and welcome to your fortnightly theology fest here on the show, which brings you the Fulton theology of NT Wright, also known as Tom Wright.

With me just in brightly, theology and apologetics editor for Premier, but it's not just theology, it's also very much a pastoral kind of a podcast. And from that point of view, we'll be mixing theology and pastoral issues as we tackle the issue of prayer on today's episode, looking forward to hearing what you wanted to ask about that. The show is of course brought to you by Premier in partnership with SBCK and NT Wright online.

You get to ask the questions here, and you can do that simply by going to our website,

registering there, and then asking your question, it's askNTY Right dot com. We're running another book giveaway at the moment as well, so if you get signed up there at the website, you'll be automatically entered into this latest prize draw, three signed copies of Tom's best-selling book, Paul, a biography, plus I'm chucking in a copy there in my own book, Unbelievable, why after 10 years of talking with atheists, I'm still a Christian for each winner. You just need to be signed up to our newsletter by the end of July to be automatically entered into the draw, askNTY Right dot com.

And if you enjoyed this podcast, you might also enjoy the unbelievable podcast. Our London conference coming up very soon, Saturday the 20th of July with 13 international thinkers, including Chris Candier, Christian Mayor, Bruxy KV, and many more. Speaking truth in a post truth world is our theme.

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Time to turn your questions on prayer then, but as of it, if you want more episodes, updates, bonus video content to enter the prize draw for sign books, do register now at askNTY Right dot com. (bell ringing) - Well, welcome along to another edition of the programme. It's my pleasure to sit down from time to time with Tom Wright to talk about all manner of things.

This is called the AskNT Right Anything podcast, Tom. And we do ask you all kinds of things. - Yes, that's fine.

- We don't always get into car mechanics or that sort of thing, but. - That would be a very short conversation with me. (laughs) - I thought we'd talk in this particular edition about prayer.

We've had a number of questions on this subject, but I thought I'd begin by simply asking, what's your sort of prayer routine and are you willing to share it with us? - Sure, I learned from an early age, really my early teens that the wise thing to do was just sit down first thing in the morning with the Bible and have a rhythm of letting God speak to me through scripture and then responding with my own prayers. And that of course is, as I eventually discovered, is what my own tradition named in the Church of England was trying to teach me anyway because the services we call morning prayer and evening prayer are basically that lots and lots and lots of Bible with lots and lots of response formalized slightly, but basically that rhythm of Bible and prayer. And that's the rhythm I follow now.

I mean, when I was Bishop of Durham, I had morning prayer with my chaplain and

anyone else who was around earlier in the morning, but I used to have a private time before that. And my regime for the private time for years has been as soon as I can, having got up in the morning to make a large pot of tea and to get the Bible and to find a quiet private spot, which becomes a kind of inner sanctuary within the home where this is where I sit in the morning. And so now that I'm not Bishop anymore and not dashing off in the way that I used to, I have a more extended time where I'm reading and praying from quite early.

I'm an early riser and I have been most of my life. So that also, because it's private, allows me to read in the original languages, which because that's what I do professionally. So for me, the Hebrew and the Greek, bring me in touch with the biblical authors and the early communities that were reading these texts in those languages and being able to sense what that's all about.

And that turns very naturally into prayer, both into the Psalms and the canticles from the prayer book, but also into my own prayers. And I have then a diary of some people and some issues that I pray about every day and some that I pray about once a week. So I have that weekly diary and a daily list.

- And is that important for you to sort of have those sort of specific things that you name and come back to on a regular basis? - Oh yes, I mean, when you say to somebody, yes, I'll pray for you on that. It's very easy for that to slide into the back of the mind and then six weeks later, "Oh, I promised to pray for so and so." And then feel guilty about it. So it tends to go into the prayer diary and the list of daily people grows over time.

And I think wisely every five or 10 years, one needs to cull that and say, "Actually, we'll commit this person to God's safekeeping "and they will now be once a week rather than once a day," or whatever. But there are many, many things in the order I get, the more there are, where as somebody who is once my spiritual director used to say, "Well, God might give you the answer "to this prayer in a day or a week or a month "or it might be 10 years, but our job is just to be faithful. "And day by day, just keep coming and saying, ""By the way, I haven't forgotten, ""please, will you do something about this? ""Or please, will you look after this person?"" Obviously, many of the people that I pray for on a daily or a week, indeed weekly basis, I'm not in touch with daily and weekly.

But, I mean, there's one of my former students, she and I have been having a baby soon, and though I am not getting regular reports, I'm thinking about them. Another of my students, he and his wife, have just had a son who has Down Syndrome, and that requires special prayer. So we hold on to them for that moment, and so on and so on and so on.

- Yeah. And when, if the diary changes and circumstances don't allow that routine to happen, do you miss it? Do you sort of feel a difference? - Oh, yes, it's very odd, and indeed, like coming to London as I've just done, getting up in a hotel room and trying to

reproduce in a funny hotel room what I would do at home. Always make tea if the hotel will allow you to, the American hotels don't always give you that facility.

But then, yes, to spend some time. And yes, travel is tricky, and I try not to feel guilty about that if I'm on an overnight flight. If it's possible, I'd like to wake up and spend a little bit of time with the Bible, but you get bashed around, and the question is not, can you make it identical every day? But can you just come back to regularity as soon as that's feasible? - Just before we come to some of the questions that have come in, I know you've been involved in helping to promote quite a big initiative of late in the Church of England, and of course, all the denominations in the UK, like Kingdom Come, which specifically has been a prayer movement which ran from, I think, ascension to Pentecost.

- Yes, that's right. And I was aware of it and vaguely joined in because the Church, which I go to, is a bit sleepy on that kind of thing, and wasn't pushing it very hard in previous years, but this year, for various reasons, they involved me in writing some of the short talks that they put out on a podcast day by day. And so I had to think into the rhythm of it and why, and so on.

And it does seem to be an extraordinary thing. For these 10 days, that's long enough to be quite significant as a program, but short enough to be quite doable. People, if you say to somebody, want you to join in this program every day for three months or something, oh my God, it's happening.

But 10 days they can kind of see you. Oh yes, that's manageable. - And essentially, it's very simple as well.

It's to simply pray for people to come to faith. - It's to pray for God's kingdom, the saving sovereign rule of God, as I might put it, to be at work in the world with specific focus on certain people for whom one has a particular concern. - Yeah, well, it's perhaps too late to be involved this year, but I'm sure it will be running again same time next year.

- It's got more and more popular as the years ago. - So that's Thy Kingdom come, if you haven't heard of it, do go and look it up online. Let's turn to some questions though.

Taylor in San Diego says, "My question is about prayer, specifically petitionary prayer. What does prayer for others actually change in the physical world? Does prayer in some way move God to take action in the world in ways that he otherwise would not have? Or is prayer more of a conversation with God or spiritual practice for the purpose of building a relationship with God that results in personal transformation of thoughts, ideas, inspiration, et cetera? And there are various other questions which we might get time to, but I think that's plenty to go on for the moment. Does prayer specifically move God or is it more for our own? Does prayer change us rather than changing God as this has been put? - Sure, it's a funny thing.

This is one of the very first questions about prayer. I remember being put to me when I was in my mid teens and a master at school discovering that I had this crazy idea that I wanted to be ordained and that I actually thought Christianity was true, et cetera, et cetera. He came in exactly with this.

- Oh, well, of course, I know you people talk about praying, but actually surely it's the case that if God wants to do something, God's gonna do it anyway. And so maybe it makes you feel better, but nothing actually changes in the real world. And I didn't have a very good answer for him then.

I still, the fact that I can still recall, over 50 years later, my feeling of frustration, that that feels like a good question, but I know it's wrong because just in my own experience at that stage, I was maybe 15 or something like that, I knew that God did on surprise and that I had seen some remarkable things happen. I mean, remarkable within the confines of my own life. And that's gone on.

And that's been the experience of Christians down the years. William Temple once said, "When I pray, coincidences happen and when I stop praying, the coincidences stop happening." And I think many, many Christians would say, "Yep, that's exactly how it is." And particularly, I think there's something strange about the rhythm of prayer in that if you pray for something every day for a year or three years or 10 years, and then quite suddenly several things go, "Ping, ping, ping, ping, ping, ping." And suddenly there's a new configuration. Where did that come from? The other way you have been praying about it for some while.

In other words, it isn't a slot machine where you just pray and then something happens. But within that context, and I think as I've got older and I've thought a lot about Genesis chapter one and the role of human beings within the creation, and then bringing that forward into Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God and Paul's appropriation of that. It looks as though what scripture is trying to tell us in a very deep and rich way is that the God who made the world made it in such a way that some of the most important things he wants to do in the world would happen through human agency, that humans are in God's image and that part of that is to reflect God's love into the world.

And that's how God wants to work in the world. He doesn't want to come in heavy top down as he works. He wants to solicit our partnership and that the mystery of prayer is that at the moment, we aren't pulling levers and just watching things go click into place, that would make us arrogant and it would make us actually puffed up and think that we were God rather than God being God.

But there's something about the humble stance within the context of worship of praising God for who he is and then bringing specific requests that seems to delight God. And this is something to do with the mystery of the Trinity that from the beginning, God intended to work in the world through his son as a genuine human being, but then through his

spirit at work in human beings. So this all comes back like most things do to Romans 8 where the prayer of unknowing, where we don't know what to pray for, is nevertheless the moment when there is a conversation going on between the Holy Spirit and the Father, which is shaping us according to the pattern of Christ, but bringing real change and freshness to God's world.

- I think that the question often arises though for people who have a view of God as having sort of essentially, well, God knows everything that's gonna happen and possibly is even predetermined everything that's gonna happen. So what on earth difference does my prayer make? And this is, I think where for instance, Janet in Wales is coming from a related question, does God know the future? Does he know the details of our lives in advance? For example, how we may suffer or our loved ones. And if he does, why pray? So it's that classic question, isn't it? Reframed slightly.

- And I think one of the things we learn, the more we read the Bible, I think, is that we can't start with a view of God as the celestial CEO or whatever, and then just sort of fit Jesus and the Holy Spirit into that. We really learn who God is by looking at Jesus. And with Jesus, there is a sort of freedom.

There is a sort of free wheeling this. I don't think Jesus, as it were, knows in advance that somebody's gonna come up to him with a trick question and show him a coin, et cetera. I think Jesus is able to respond in the moment and say fresh things, et cetera, et cetera.

And I think that's an image of what God is like. And I think part of creation is God saying, "Let there be God giving creation the freedom "to be itself. "God has made the world in such a way.

"It isn't a machine." A lot of these issues arise because our culture is still really soaked in 18th century philosophy and 18th century was when they were making all these splendid machines and clocks were being developed in new ways. And then eventually in 19th century, they built steam engines and thinking of God as the celestial mechanic as well as the CEO. And so it's all determined.

And actually, it's time we got Einstein in on this action. There's an awful lot of indeterminacy going on because God is a God who delights in giving freedom to his creatures, which is a huge risk. And God then takes the consequences of that risk in Jesus.

- I suppose that the thing that's then some people think, but hang on, that means God isn't in control after all. And how on earth is he gonna achieve his purposes if he's giving freedom to us, human creatures? - You know, there's a sense, is the conductor of the orchestra in charge? Well, yes, he or he is, but the viola player has freedom, the horn player has freedom, they all, and the conductor's job is to give them the space in which freely to play the music that they want to play. And depending on, if you go back a few

centuries before we got a bit more regimented, quite often that would include a measure of freedom.

And as a former jazz player, when somebody sets up a jazz number, does this mean that the players are less free because somebody has told them what the harmonies are? No, they are more free within this framework. They can now express themselves, often in ways which delight and surprise the friends who are playing with them. So that's more like what's going on, I think, with creation.

(gentle music)

(upbeat music) - The Ask Anti-Write Anything podcast is brought to you by Premier in partnership with SBCK and Anti-Write Online. Now, Anti-Write Online is the place where you can find all of Tom's online theology courses taught by Tom himself in video format. Now, if you've been around church, you probably know the Lord's Prayer, but have you ever really thought about it and why Jesus gave it as the model for talking to God? In his brand new course, Tom will guide you through the context that informs the Lord's Prayer.

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(upbeat music) Mark in Washington State asks, "I'm curious how you reconcile Jesus's assertion that we can ask for anything in his name or ask the Father in his name from John 14 and 15.

In expectation that it will come to pass with the reality of the many times Godly, Christ-following people have prayed for the healing of loved ones, only to have them pass away with no apparent answer to their prayers. Thank you, I know this is never an easy question. - No, it isn't an easy question.

And in my close circle of acquaintances, there's been one such instance within the last year, a dear God-son of mine who died of cancer in his mid-30s, a lovely Christian young man with a super family and-- - Lots of people praying, I'm sure. - Lots of people praying, actually a lot because he was quite well known in his circles. And that remains a mystery, and none of us want to pretend that it's anything other than that.

However, he himself wrote some blog posts and diary posts in his last year when it became increasingly clear that he was going to die, die very young, which made it clear that this didn't alter his belief in the fact that God does answer prayer, but that it always remains a mystery. I mean, in a more easygoing example, I've often known that when you pray specifically about one particular thing and you think you know, this is the answer to this question, Lord, please, will you do this thing now? This is what we

recommend we need. And while you're praying about that, God quietly is doing something else over here, and suddenly you realize, oh, I see, God seems to be taking these prayers and this is a much better answer than the one I had in mind.

Now, I'm not saying that for my God-son to die when he did was a much better answer in all sorts of ways, but I think that's the point at which we say, we're here staring into a void which sometimes seems dark, and sometimes seems bright, where we just have to say, into your hands, we are not in charge, God is in charge, and though that is really tough sometimes, but I do believe that what Jesus said in John 14 and 15, he really meant. - Yeah, well, I was gonna say, what did he mean then? If saying, asking for things in Jesus' name is not some sort of magic cue to then get that thing you're asking for, what does Jesus mean by saying? - I think it's something to do with the phrase in Jesus' name. - Right.

- And this isn't a cop-out, it's a way of saying, who is this Jesus in whose name we're asking? And this is the Jesus who in the scene in "Gethsemane" in Matthew and Mark anyway, asked very specifically a question to which the answer was no, namely, please can there be another way? And then nevertheless, not my will but yours. So the Jesus in whose name we pray is the one who himself went through that and ended up saying, my God, why did you abandon me? And we know in retrospect, and the gospel writers trying to tell us in retrospect, that actually those prayers were amazingly gloriously answered in a different way, not that he was able to escape the cross, but that through the cross, he did the most extraordinary world-changing victory. - Another question here from Carol in Scotland says, "Can we, as resurrection people, tackle sin and evil in all its forms where we see it? Can we pray for freedom from disease, for instance?" And I suppose that goes direct to the heart of that question.

Can we be so bold as to simply pray for people to be healed of disease and sickness? - To be sure. And I have known people who, the doctors have basically said, sorry, there's no chance, and people have got round and prayed and around the world, and have an example in my enclosed family, a girl who was age six diagnosed with double kidney failure and told it was a matter of days. And that was 35 years ago, and she's now a healthy, happy, 40-something Christian girl.

And there is no explanation the doctors had no answer to, we don't understand why she's not dying. And that is repeated again and again, if you talk to people who've been involved in that kind of ministry, that is clearly the case. So I want to put that there and say, "This really does happen partly because God can do whatever God wants." The idea that he's sort of imprisoned in a system of his own making, which means that he isn't allowed to do different things, I think is quite dangerous.

Sorry, there was a second half of that question. - Well, it was really just, can we pray for freedom from disease, for instance? - Well, yes, we can, at the moment, that prayer, I

think, is subsumed within the larger prayer, going back to Romans 8, which is, and also places in the book of Revelation, where God's people have always prayed, how long, oh Lord, how long. This is where we are at the moment.

We know this is not the end of your story. Please will you bring the end of the story, and please will you also bring such anticipations of that end as are appropriate at the moment. And I would put that in a maximalist way, not just a minimal, a well, there may be some slight improvement, but actually we've got to wait until the last act.

- This is my admission. I try to be faithful in prayer, but very often if I'm presented with someone who is obviously physically sick, or whatever it might be, I don't always go for the full-blooded, heal this person, God kind of prayer. I very often pray to sort of, may they know your peace, your strength in difficult times.

And I fear that's because it's a slightly easier prayer for God to answer somehow. - In some ways, yes. I'm inclined to say, people are fundraisers, I'm not a fundraiser, but when people who are fundraising will say, well, you're going to say, and so, why not ask for 10,000 pounds? And if they say, here's a fiver, then that's fine.

But if you only ask for a fiver, that's all you're gonna get. - So I'm inclined to say, we should err on the side of going for the big one. I mean, I had a message just yesterday from a friend in another country who just three quite separate things are afflicting her at the moment.

And I just sent an email message back, just including a prayer for healing and for peace while that's going on. And that's all one can do at the moment, so I will continue to pray for healing there. And God can do with that prayer whatever God wants to do.

I mean, I think part of what is difficult for us to understand has to do with the working of the Holy Spirit, that over the last generation, because of the charismatic movement, depending on the costalism and so on, we've tended to think of the Holy Spirit as working only in a dramatic, sudden outbursts of whatever it may be. But for all Christians who are indelped by the Spirit, their prayers and the Spirit's prayers are melded together and God knows what's going on. And God is at work through our personalities, some of which may be more bouncy and effervescent and some of which may be quieter and more introverted.

And that's fine, so that our task is to be present with God in the Spirit, shaped according to the pattern of Christ and to hold these. And the wisdom from, oh, ancient Christians, the desert farthest people like that, as well as I have to say, the wisdom from many great Jewish rabbis who've said the same thing, is that when we are in the presence of God, sometimes you just get an awareness, this is what you should be praying for now. And sometimes, I've only had it once or twice in my whole life.

I've suddenly had the sense you've been praying for this person for the last weeks, months, whatever it is. It's gonna be okay. And so you can scale that down in a strong sense.

And the last time this happened, I waited a week and then emailed the friend whose daughter it was that I was praying for and said, "I'm just wondering if actually there was a turn "for the better last weekend, got the message, "how did you know?" So that does happen. - For the person listening who thinks, "Gosh, I wish I could have your prayer life, Tom." Because prayer for me is, I don't feel like I'm getting much back. Or it's just difficult, it feels dry.

And I struggle at it. Where would you say to begin in that case? - I'm a good Anglican. Begin with the Psalms.

Actually, I hope I'm not a very good Christian, but I'm a Christian. Begin with the Psalms. The Psalms were Jesus' prayer book.

They should be our prayer book. One of the things I really grieve over in the contemporary church is that so many lively churches have given up using the Psalms. And they say, "Well, it's so difficult.

"Our people are new to all this." And said, "Well, yeah, but there are ways." Get them used to it. There are ways. It's like the Psalms are like when you learn to play the piano, and these are the basic scales and arpeggios.

And to begin with, yeah, your fingers may not be, but once you're into it, then the world of Haydn Mozart and Beethoven starts to open up in front of you. So the Psalms, Billy Graham once said that he prayed five Psalms a day. He said, "Because they help me get along with God, "and he read one chapter of Proverbs a day, "because it helps me get along with man." He said, "I heard him say that." And I thought, "Wow, good idea." My tradition gives you, on average, five Psalms a day, get through the Psalter in a month, and I get through Proverbs in a month.

Because I now read them in Hebrew or the Septuagint is in Greek, I go a bit slower than that, but they are always there. It's a river of prayer into which we can step. And very honest prayer very often.

- Oh, the Psalms are brutally honest. Hey God, wake up, what's going on? - Yeah. - It's like the disciples on the boat with Jesus.

Hey, come on, you're supposed to be in charge here. There's a storm going, where are we gonna drown? And the Psalms are exactly like that. Wake up God, why don't you do something? And that's robust, it's very Jewish.

And if we find that almost striking and offensive, well so we should. - But it's, and coming

back to the point you made at the very beginning, which is that sometimes it's difficult to simply start prayer from a standing start. Sometimes it very often is response to scripture.

- Oh yes. - Which fires up our prayers. - Oh yes, and that's, again and again, again been so.

And for me again, the framework of an easy set liturgy. There are certain prayers in the old prayer book, which I still use, which say, better than I possibly could, exactly what I want to pray. And I think many young Christians find that liturgy feels constricting and dry, and this is somebody else's framework.

And I wanna say, it's like a suit of clothes, which has been handed down from an older brother or whatever, that actually you'll find as you grow into this, it'll be comfortable and you'll be at home there. - Final question from Elizabeth in Northern Ireland. She says, "I heard a sermon that we need to give God "permission to act through prayer." They said, "He can't do anything on earth "unless we ask Him to." I totally disagree.

We would like to know what you have to say about this. - God doesn't need our permission to do what He told about once. However, as I said, it seems that the way God has made the world is such as to give humans the dignity of sharing agency.

And of course God can override, overrule, and just as well, because if everything that had to happen today in this city, whatever, was the result of someone's prayers, there's a lot of things which would just stop dead in their tracks, 'cause nobody happened to be praying about it, so it's very odd. But I mean, I understand that the preacher in question was overstating a point in order to say, "Don't just hang back and assume that if God is God, "He's gonna do it anyway. "You'd jolly well pray about it." - Yeah.

And just as we close out, something that I have more and more been drawn towards is the theology of the idea of us being involved at some level in a sort of a cosmic warfare. And our prayers are being joined, if you like, in that movement of God's kingdom. But there is another kingdom pressing against that.

So when we don't perhaps always see the answers, we would like to our prayers. We've got to remember it's a battleground, and we don't see victory in every battle in the war. - I would put together that scene from Gethsemane, where Jesus is absolutely up against it, and sweating drops of blood and so on.

Deeply, this is not the sort of calm, mystical, easy access. This is absolutely up against the wall. Put that together with Ephesians chapter six, where Paul talks about our struggle being with Prince baptism powers, and where the weapon of all prayer is one of the weapons in the spiritual warfare.

And one of the things that I think I've learned is that often that's going on when we don't

really think it is, that we just were doing something, seems to be ordinary, and it may be only later we look back and say, oh my goodness, that was what was at stake there, some real major issue going on. One can get, I don't know how to put this, as you can see, one can get so overexcited about this. So, oh, you know, on the Christian soldiers marching as to war, let's go.

And I won't say this is a messy war. It's dark, the enemy does not play fair, there's no Geneva Convention in spiritual warfare. And so often, the things we have to do are to hang in there when it's tough.

In scruite bladders, Lewis has scruite the senior devil, saying to wormwood the junior devil, make no mistake, our cause, that is the devil's cause, is never more in danger than when a human being, here's the phrase, no longer desiring but still intending to do God's will, looks out on a universe from which every trace of him seems to have been removed, asks why he has been forsaken and still obeys. And that's obviously a picture of Jesus on the cross, but Lewis is turning it into an image of what it's like when we're praying, when no longer desiring but still intending, that's a wonderful phrase. - Absolutely, a great place to conclude, but perhaps as it's, this particular episode is about prayer, it seems to make sense to perhaps conclude with prayer.

So John, I wonder if you would just lead a brief prayer, perhaps for anyone listening who themselves is struggling with prayer, or who would like to, in some way, there are issues in their life which they've struggled to pray through and to see God's hand at work and perhaps you could pray for that. - Sure, let's pray. Gracious Father, you make us in your image so that we can reflect your love into the world and so that as we do that, we can know that love in ourselves.

I pray for my brothers and sisters around the world as we all learn to pray, as we all learn to be kingdom people, to be image-bearers, to be intentional about standing before you with the needs of your world on our hearts, pray that you will take us as we are very different from one another, different personalities, different backgrounds, different temperaments, but use us by your spirit to be part of the great movement of prayer, part of the great breath of the spirit, blowing in the world, catching us up within it. Teach us to pray, take us each one of us from where we are to where you would have us be. Grow us spiritually, make us people of faith, people of prayer, people of hope, so that through our prayers in ways, perhaps that we'll never even see, except just glimpse occasionally, your will may be done and your kingdom come.

We pray in Jesus' name, amen. - Amen.

(upbeat music) - Well, thanks for being with us on the podcast today and I hope that the subject of prayer has encouraged your own prayer life in some way.

Next time on the podcast, it's other faiths that we'll be looking at your questions around.

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