

OpenTheo

#83 How do I feel God's presence?

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Why don't I feel the presence of God? Should I have had a road-to-Damascus conversion like Paul? What should I do about my feelings of shame? Support the show – give from the USA or Rest of the world (and get the show e-book) · For bonus content, the newsletter, prize draws and to ask a question sign up at www.askntwright.com · Exclusive podcast offers on Tom's books and videos from SPCK & NT Wright Online · Subscribe to the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast via your preferred podcast platform

Transcript

Hi there. Before we begin today's podcast, I want to share an incredibly special resource with you today. If you like me, life can get pretty hectic pretty quickly.

But one thing that helps me slow down is connecting with God in new ways. And I'd like to share a resource that has really helped me do that. It's called Five Ways to Connect with God.

And you can download it for free right now at Premier Insight.org/resources. I think you'll find refreshment for your soul. So go right now to premier insight.org/resources and download your copy. That's premier insight.org/resources. The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

Hello welcome back to the show. It's Justin Briley, Premier's theology and apologetics editor bringing you another dose of Tom Wright's thought and theology. Hope you enjoy today's show.

Today, tackling your questions on emotions and the Christian life. Should I be experiencing the tangible presence of God as a Christian and someone who has questions about feelings of shame for things they've done in the past. So if you're listening today and you're dealing with similar kinds of emotions, hope today's show helps you.

The show brought to you as ever in partnership with SBCK and NT Wright online. Quick

shout out to show listener Al Handre who says hi Justin wanted to thank you for picking my question for NT to answer on a recent Ask NTY Anything podcast. Coincidentally, you released the episode on my birthday and it was such a treat.

I've been following the podcast since the beginning and I'm a big fan. Thank you for all you do. Al Handre, thank you very much for being part of the many people who are now downloading the show from week to week.

And if you perhaps know someone who'd enjoy the podcast, do make sure to tell them about it over at ask NT Wright dot com. And perhaps you'd like to also leave a rating and a review if you haven't done that before for the show to help others discover it on podcast. If you do subscribe to the show over at ask NT Wright dot com, you'll get our regular email updates bonus content and of course the chance to ask a question yourself.

You get entered into any prize draws as well along the way. And if you're able to support the show, that would be greatly appreciated. We've got the exclusive show ebook to send you as a thank you if you can do that.

Tom's response is to 12 big questions about the Bible, life and faith. Again, that's ask NT Wright dot com for now on to today's show. Welcome back to this week's edition of the show.

It's always a joy to be able to bring your questions to Tom and as ever, there'll be a reminder towards the end of today's show about how you can submit questions for future editions of the program as well. Returning to some pastoral issues and as ever, Tom, these always come with a disclaimer that you cannot be anyone's pastor via podcast. So it's always best to seek out why spiritual counsel whenever it comes to pastoral questions of the type we're going to tackle today.

But had a number of questions, nevertheless on questions around feelings or emotions when it comes to the way we engage our faith. And I thought it'd be interesting to put a few of these together and get your thoughts on them. Let's start with Sarah in Darby's share.

He wants to ask about the Holy Spirit and the role of feelings in that. And quite a long question here. I'll read it in its entirety here.

Sarah says, Tom, you talk so passionately about how being a Christian means that you're filled with the Holy Spirit and that this presence is felt. Now, I believe Jesus is the Son of God. I believe he died and was resurrected.

I consider myself a Christian. Yet I feel nothing. I'm wanting to be guided and follow God's plan for my life.

I pray, read the Bible, seek his advice and enlightenment. Yet I feel nothing but that I'm wandering this world alone. Am I doing something wrong? I'm actually not a Christian because I don't feel or hear from the Spirit.

Or am I expectations of being filled by the Spirit wrong? Could this be because I was brought up a Christian from birth and so there's been no "born again" type moment. I long to feel this partnering in life and would welcome any words of insight or advice. Tom, over to you.

Wow. Yes. I wouldn't wish to give anyone the impression that every day and every hour of every day I am as happy, excited, aware of the presence of God as I am on some occasions.

I am, I think, a reasonably normal human being. My emotions come and go sometimes with the weather. It happens to be a rather gray, gloomy day outside.

So my natural way is to feel a bit gray and gloomy and then to see how I can fight my way out of that and so on and so forth. And if I have spoken as I have about a sense of the presence of God, a sense of the reality of Jesus being with me, a sense sometimes of a sudden awareness of something that I ought to do or say or someone I ought to see, which comes quite unexpectedly. But often as a result of praying about a particular situation, well, those things are wonderful.

There's a lovely line in the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins who says, "I greet him the days I meet him and bless when I understand." I think that's very true, a sense that, ah, he is here. I have been ignoring him, but yes, this is wonderful and for a moment I can see something clearly and that's amazing and that's enough to live on for the next week or month or sometimes longer. Many great Christian teachers and writers and practitioners as well, I think of Mother Teresa for instance, have testified to quite long lasting periods of what you might loosely call spiritual dryness or spiritual darkness where for whatever reason it seems as though all we can do is hang on to Jesus' coattails assuming that by regular prayer, by regular sharing in the Eucharist, by regular reading of Scripture, we are in fact clinging on to where we should be and what we should do and sometimes I think we are asked by God to go through those dark places because much of the world is in darkness and God's people sometimes have to share the darkness of the world like Jesus did in Gethsemane and on the cross in order then that there may be light coming through as a result.

This is a very difficult area but in particular I want to say we are all very different. We know much more now than we did when I was young about the range of personality types. We have metrics for measuring them whether it's the Myers-Briggs or the Enneagram or all the other things that often businesses use to measure people's strengths and weaknesses and we need to learn about ourselves, to know ourselves and to recognise the kinds of things which we naturally respond to and that we don't

naturally respond to and as a pastor I have sometimes had to work with and pray with people who have felt absolutely nothing despite like this good questioner.

Apparently saying and believing all the right things and perhaps being brought up as a Christian and sometimes when it comes down to it it appears that there is some emotional blockage which might be to do with parents or school or siblings or something which has shut up a bit of their emotional resilience or resonance in such a way that it's blocked off to God as well or seems to be blocked off. Now God can break through anything and everything but sometimes it takes wise pastoral care to say what else is going on in my life? Why does there seem to be this blockage? But we are all called many times to walk in faith in the dark. We walk by faith and not by sight and I don't say that likely.

It's a tough call but if that's where we are then that's where we are and I would recommend Tumor-inthens which is where Paul describes what that's like, what's that's been like for him and if we cling on and keep praying then there will be times of light, there will be seasons of joy and hope and so on but it's not a given and it has to be worked at in terms of the dynamic of our own personality and relationships and so on. Much more I could say that that would be the start. I was going to raise a similar point which I remember being approached by a young man at a conference I was involved in a few years ago and he had a very similar story to Sarah's here saying I believe in Christianity yet when I go to church other people are having these ecstatic sublime experiences feeling God speaking to them.

I just don't get any of that. None of that sort of you know I just don't seem to have an am I really a Christian I ask myself and my advice to him was well and we were at a sort of quite an intellectual conference it was about you know questions and apologetics and that sort of thing. I said not you know don't judge your experience of God by other peoples the way that they encounter God because some people are just wired differently aren't they and for them their encounter with God will be a more intellectual, a more you know when they read a book that they really feel connected because actually something comes alive in them for another person it's going to be some ecstatic moment in a worship service which for the other individual doesn't really do anything for them.

So I think I think sometimes helping to sort of not judge your experience by other people's experience is sometimes helpful to them. Yeah and I've often thought you know when Jesus goes round the circus his love God with your heart, mind, soul and strength each of us probably naturally comes from one of those angles and if you're somebody who naturally comes in on the mind track then you may have to work at the heart and soul and strength. There are other people whose love of God naturally overflows when they're ministering to people in direst need when they're helping people who are deeply sick or poor or whatever it may be and they find that there is a release and a fulfillment there and according to Matthew 25 they are meeting Jesus himself in the faces of those

people and then maybe they have to go round the circle as well and do the heart and the mind as well as the soul and strength.

So we have to start where we are and then seek patiently to fill ourselves out as it were to fill in the bits that are lacking but there's no there shouldn't be a stress of and let me say I too was brought up in a church going Christian Bible reading home I never had a big Damascus road experience and I have sometimes felt a bit jealous of those who did. God moves in many mysterious ways he takes us where we are takes us on to where he wants us to be and we can't judge ourselves by one another's particular journeys. Hi there before we go any further I want you to know about a very special ebook we're releasing this month called Critical Race Theory and Christianity.

This ebook draws from two unbelievable podcasts with Neil Shenvie, Rasselberry, Owen Strand and Jermaine Marshall addressing questions like has so-called woke ideology taken over parts of the church or is white privilege a problem in the church and is critical race theory compatible with the gospel. I'd love for you to have a copy of this powerful ebook as my special thanks to you for your gift to Premier Insight today the ministry that brings you this podcast each week you see all of the conversations, insight, resources and encouragement that you get from Premier Insight programs like this one are only possible because of the support of wonderful friends like you without your generosity none of this would be possible so please go to premier insight dot org slash give and make a donation today that's premier insight dot org slash give and don't forget to download our newest ebook Critical Race Theory and Christianity as my special thank you. Well mentioning Damascus Road experiences let's get to Jeff in Fort Collins Colorado who asks that very question I was struck dumb when I first read of Paul's gap years that is the decade or so of silence you mentioned in your recent biography.

Now I struggle in my newly found faith with doubt and wonder why I can't have a road to Damascus conversion and then when I read the kind of Paul in Acts is if it's as if he's on fire from the get go Arabia Jerusalem Antioch there's no pause and there's a sort of question here at one level of can you provide more detail on these gap years in Tarsus and so on but also this sort of question of wondering why he hasn't had a similar road to Damascus experience where suddenly he's on fire and you know often doing all the things that Paul did. I remember many years ago hearing a preacher imagine himself in Philippi in Acts 16 when Paul has come to town he goes to the Jewish place of prayer he's expounding the scriptures to the people who happen to be there one of them is a woman called Lydia and it simply says the Lord opened her heart to believe what Paul was saying and she believes and she welcomes Paul and his friends into her home etc and then a little while later Paul is attacked and beaten up by the authorities and thrown into jail and he and Silas are singing hymns at midnight as you do and suddenly there's an earthquake and the walls fall down and the and the jailer is about to commit suicide and Paul says don't do it and he says what was said you to be saved and Paul says believe in Jesus and he gets baptized and it's all wonderful and then this preacher imagined a

conversation a week or two later between the jailer and Lydia where the jailer says to Lydia so what happened when you were converted and he said well I just he was talking about the scriptures and Jesus and it all made sense and he says well there wasn't an earthquake no walls fell down you didn't feel like killing yourself and no nothing of that and then the jailer going off and thinking I'm a bit worried about Lydia I'm not sure she's really there I'm not sure she's really had this big experience and in other words don't bother about all that stuff if that's what it takes for God to bring you to faith or him or her to faith so be it but we all have different tracks the important thing is the tracks that lead to Jesus and if we get to Jesus through whatever means it is then that's the place to be so in terms of the gap years and I think I would encourage the friend who wrote this to reread the bit of the biography because just lists Arabia, Jerusalem, Antioch, etc but actually I have argued very strongly I think that the time in Arabia was not Paul dashing off to do some missionary work but Paul in deep quandary saying what on earth is going on and like Elijah going back to Mount Sinai to hand in his commission to say look I've been very zealous and now what's happened what's this all about and he gets a fresh commission then he goes to Jerusalem and he doesn't go to Antioch yet he goes off to Tarsus and we know nothing that's the gap year or the gap decade and I'm not sure that Paul was wrestling with doubt at that point we have no sense of that I think he was living probably with his parents or close by his parents and family and wrestling with the big issues of searching the scriptures and making sense of what had just happened of the fact that Jesus really was Israel's Messiah but recognizing that many of his family quite possibly his parents quite possibly somebody to whom he'd been betrothed we just don't know and said no this is not happening Jesus cannot be Israel's Messiah etc so I think the the gap decade was really important as deepening Paul's understanding of scripture his prayer life his wrestling with the big issues and it was after that that Barnabas came and found him and said now come to Antioch because we need you we need your help and then things move on from there thank you very much hope that's helped you Jeff and indeed the discussion that we've had already on the podcast today a final question here from Ryan in Indiana and this again it is very much a personal pastoral sort of a question as much as anything but Ryan says I'm 23 and I came out of a sea of sexual sin about four years ago I think I was coping with shame and a lack of affirmation through drugs and sex but I eventually turned from my sin I didn't grow up knowing Jesus but my brother told me about him when I was in high school took me a few years but I eventually surrendered to Jesus when I was about 19 people who knew me then and know me now tell me often that I'm nothing like the person I was back then and my parents had compassion for me welcoming me with open arms and receiving me back as their son today though I have an immense amount of shame and guilt for the many drunken sexual encounters I had the atrocious things I said to women when I was drunk and the hard truth that some of the women I was with may feel shame for having been with me as well so my question is twofold in your opinion does God want me to feel ashamed of the sin I committed four years ago and would God want me to have compassion on myself some people whom I love and respect think that we have no need

to forgive ourselves because after all it's not ourselves to whom we are indebted but God but what about those of us who are crippled with shame for the things we've already been forgiven for and Ryan finishes his question here asking some people have pointed me to is equal 36 where God says then you will load yourselves still others have pointed to passages about God's discipline such as Hebrew 13 to say that sometimes God it is God's will that we feel great shame in order that we keep within repentance so what are your thoughts on this obviously Ryan's really struggling with the shame he feels for his past life I can well understand this and it seems right throughout the history of the church there have been many many people who have done a great many things of which subsequently they've been ashamed but who have come to faith and have been welcomed into the family of the church and what then happens in terms of the memory in terms of the psychology in terms of the kind of rumbling imagination of of the half remembered things that happened that I did when etc etc that's something that has to be worked through it doesn't automatically just stop and God's forgiveness doesn't mean you know supposing you have badly hurt somebody physically supposing you beaten them up or broken their limbs or whatever the fact that you may then repent and be forgiven doesn't mean that those limbs heal themselves automatically and it's the same with things in our own minds and bodies and so on that there are residual memories I think the answer has to be then with wise pastoral help to pray through those memories and to seek God's healing for those memories there's been an enormous amount done over the last generation on the healing of memories and that's not something that happens overnight there are times when there can be suddenly a great load lifted particularly when wise people are praying with and for you and that can happen and if I was in that person's situation I would go to a wise pastor or spiritual director or counselor and say I think I need to have some memories actually healed please can you help me to pray with me and for me and that might take a week it might take a month it might take two or three years or more that's completely unknowable in advance but I do believe that God does not want his beloved sons and daughters of whom this friend is one to go around crippled by that memory that shame if there are people out there who they feel they have wronged to whom they need to apologize and seek their forgiveness then though that may be hard that may be something which perhaps ought to be done that's a difficult one and will depend on this and that and so on on wise judgment and again pastoral help required but it seems to me it is not God's basic will that whenever people come to prayer they should have this deep load of of shame and guilt that ought to be lifted it is lifted in Christ if you're in Christ there is no condemnation Romans 8 1 is absolutely right and the end of that great chapter who then is going to condemn us because Christ Jesus has died and is raised and is at the right hand of God and intercedes for us so what's your problem in a sense but if you still have that lingering memory then you need to find somebody with whom you can pray that the fact which is a fact of no condemnation will become a reality in your internal memory and psyche as well and God bless you that may take time but it can be done yes God bless you indeed Ryan thanks all sorts of Sarah and Jeff who have been in touch on today's show thank

you as well Tom for helpful wise pastoral advice and again we'll reiterate always best to seek wise counsel though in person for many of these issues that have been talked about today don't just depend on the Tom's voice disembodied on a podcast do go and seek help but thanks for being with us this week Tom we'll see you again next time thank you thank you so much for listening to today's show and next time we're going to be asking what did Jesus' death actually achieve your questions on that theme will be featured just a reminder that our show partner NtRight Online are offering a free ebook from Tom on the book of Acts to podcast listeners the links are with the show notes today find out more about the show at askntright.com and if you're able to support us and help bring Tom's thought and theology to many more folk would be delighted to send you the exclusive show ebook as well 12 answers to questions about the Bible life and faith again that's askntright.com and click on give for now thanks for listening and see you next time

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