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#84 Why did Jesus have to die? What did it achieve?

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Is saying Jesus 'had to die' putting a limit on God's forgiveness? And if Jesus defeated sin why does the world still look so bad? Tom answers these and other listener questions. 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

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast Hello welcome back to the show it's Justin Briely, Premius Theology and Apologetics editor bringing you another weekly dose of all things Tom Wright and brought you a course in partnership with SPCK and NT Wright Online. Today your questions revolve around why did Jesus have to die and what did his death achieve? Always enjoy your feedback as well to previous editions of the show and a little while back we did a show on parables and Tom responding to some listener questions on parables. One was about the friend at midnight parable and there was one particular question that came up and a few people have been in touch to say that they wanted to let Tom know about an alternative way of approaching this.

So Rick Lee for instance gets in touch to say I heard you and Tom Wright talking about Luke 11 specifically the friend at midnight parable. You brought up the alternative translation of the Greek anidei from verse 8 to preserve the honor of his name speaking of the sleeper in the parable. Now Tom seems unfamiliar with this alternative translation.

Thankfully Trevor and Dr Wright has made it clear he's still learning so I hope this may be a resource for him too. Several years ago I stumbled on this alternative translation and you've attached kindly a resource from an article in Jets by Alan Johnson which refers to Kenneth Bailey in the footnotes who you also recommend in this topic Rick. The gist of the issue is that this word, I think I'm pronouncing this right, an idea, only appears once in scripture right here in Luke 11 verse 8 and this makes it much harder to

translate confidently.

It is used hundreds of times in other ancient Greek literature and that offers some guidance. So Bailey and Johnson both think that the word rightly understood is aimed at the sleeper, not the petitioner, not the one banging on the door. And this is based on the Jewish chiasmic structure of Jesus's words and then the word is wrongly translated as shamelessness.

Okay, careful study of the singular word recommends that it be translated to preserve the honor of his name and is aimed at the God character in the parable, not the persistent neighbor. I'll let Bailey and Johnson be the scholars on this matter. I'm just a happy learner.

Anyway you say the whole passage makes much more sense from the Lord's model prayer to the parable followed up by your father knows how to give good kids. It all flows much better with this interpretation. So that's an interesting one and I have passed that on to Tom, he's very happy to hear of this alternative way of understanding the verse that actually rather than speaking of the neighbor knocking at the door as shameless, but rather it's the sleeper to preserve the honor of their name to protect their good name that they get up that that makes more sense of the passage.

Thank you very much, Rick for getting in touch and others who pointed that out to me as well. Always willing to learn together on the show. Hope you learned something from Tom as well in today's edition of the program.

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Let's get into today's questions. Great to be joined by you, Tom again for today's edition of the podcast. And well, we've talked in many previous episodes about atonement, but people continue to ask questions from lots of different angles, but essentially wanting you to talk about what exactly happened on the cross.

What did Jesus death achieve? Did Jesus have to die? These are the sorts of questions that frequently come up. Again, I can only encourage people if you want to do deeper dives into this, do go and read Tom's books, especially obviously on this particular subject, the day the revolution began. And we will make sure there are links from today's show to those resources.

But yes, what did Jesus death achieve is one of the issues we'll be looking at in the moment's time. But first of all, why did Jesus have to die? Here's a couple of questions. We'll sort of put them together, Tom, and see what you have to say in response.

Firstly, Malcolm in Henley in Arden says there seemed to be a number of possible

reasons as to why Jesus had to die. But in your opinion, was there one overriding reason? And exactly where is that reason to be found in the gospels, please? And if possible, could you answer this in layman's terms? Okay. And then Isaac in Switzerland says, again, similar, why did Jesus have to die on the cross? I understand that a torment had to be made for our sin.

But to say that someone had to die seems like putting limitations on God and almost making sin a force comparable to God. Additionally, there are many cases where Jesus was able to forgive people's sins while he was alive on the earth. So why did he need to die? So perhaps taking Malcolm's question first, if you were simply in, as he says, layman's terms, giving one overriding reason of why Jesus had to die.

What would be your, your, I don't know, elevator response, Tom? Let me let me begin by saying part of our trouble here, as I've said many times before, but it has to be said again, is that we have lived with the wrong narrative that we've lived with the idea of we are sinners. So how can we get to heaven? And if you start with how do we get to heaven and then say, well, God has this moral scale and we've all failed at it, then you will end up with the sort of attainment theories and wrangling that have happened over the last few hundred years. Whereas the New Testament starts with God's desire to become the true sovereign on earth as in heaven.

At the moment, in Jesus' day when Jesus goes around announcing this is the time for God to become king, it's manifestly obvious that God's rich does not run in First Century Palestine or anywhere else in that world. The question then, and this I think goes on to some questions we may come to later on in another show, is, well, in that case, why is the world still a mess? Because if you live with the idea that Jesus died for us in so that we can go to heaven, then it doesn't matter if the world is still a mess, because we're out of here, we're going somewhere else. But as soon as you say that it's actually all to do with God becoming king on earth as in heaven, then you have that other problem which we will deal with.

So it's very difficult to say, where is it in the gospels? Because it's everywhere in the gospels. Because the gospels themselves in a multitude of different ways all say this is the story that completes and draws to its proper conclusion, the great story of scripture from Genesis to Malachi or in the Hebrew canon from Genesis to Chronicles. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in different ways say, we are now telling you where that story lands up and it lands up with Jesus.

And Jesus himself constantly says, the scriptures have to be fulfilled. And he's not just talking about three or four proof texts, he's talking about an entire narrative sweep, which is how God through the call of Abraham and his family is rescuing the entire creation from its chaos, which it's collapsed back into as a result of the fall, etc, etc. So that's the great scriptural story.

It reaches its climax in Jesus. And then if you want focal points for seeing where that happens, well, obviously the passion narrative, Jesus going to his death and the way that the different evangelists interpret that by drawing on scripture, etc. One passage which is often ignored in this respect is John chapter 12, where Jesus, it's a very strange passage that when the Greeks who have come to the feast say, we want to see Jesus, Jesus doesn't go and see them.

But he sees this as a sign that this is the moment when at last God is going to become king of the whole world. And he sees that his own death is approaching and he says, now the ruler of this world is cast out. And if I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.

In other words, Jesus dies so that God can now embrace the whole world and invite people of every sort to become part of his true people. How he does that, very clear in John, as it's very clear in the others, is by Jesus dying in the place of sinners in John, it's focused on Barabbas. Not this man, but Barabbas and Barabbas is a brigand.

Barabbas is the one who deserved to die. Jesus didn't. And part of our difficulty is we come to the gospels looking for little dogmatic nuggets.

You don't get that. You get a narrative and we're not used to living with narrative theology. But that's what the gospels give us, which is why many people don't bother about the gospels so much and turn to Paul, leading him in that dogmatic fashion, which again is misunderstanding.

So I hope this is becoming clear that it's about the weight of the world's evil, which is quasi-personal. This is what is meant by the Satan, the accuser, the dark force, which is and isn't truly personal, which seems to be the cumulative power of all the evil in the world, doing its best to drag God's good creation down into chaos. And the cross, seen from the larger scriptural perspective with focal points like Isaiah 53, but many others as well, seen as Jesus is coming to the place where in the purpose of God all this has been prepared so that the weight of the world's evil can be taken in one place, in one person.

Romans 8, 1-4, which I've mentioned in a previous episode, that God condemned sin in the flesh of Jesus. That's a deep and dark mystery. But that is so that then God's new creation purpose can fan out from that point, starting with Jesus' resurrection.

And that's basically how the story works. And at the personal level, and I think this is where people struggle, I think, with, because that's a story in which Jesus has done something, cosmic, Jesus has done something that allows God to this new in-breaking of God's kingdom into the world. But many people, as you've said many times, boil it down to a sort of personal, "I need to get to heaven" sort of, you know, equation, you know, sort of.

And I think that's what people are looking for is what did it do for me specifically? What did Jesus die for on my part to allow me to go to heaven? And are they simply asking the wrong question there? Or is there that personal element that we do need to understand and take? Of course, there is the personal element. I mean, the whole story is about God's plan for creation and for humans within it. And for humans, it's a glorious thing.

It's not just you get to escape from punishment and sit around, heaving a sigh of relief for all eternity. You get to become, sharers in God's whole, creational project. You get to be the rulers, you get to be priests.

In Revelation chapter 5, one of the other crystal clear passages, the Lamb who was slain, that is Jesus himself, has died, has purchased people by his blood so that they can be the royal priesthood. Revelation is full of this notion of the vitally important vocation of renewed human beings. So the fact of Jesus defeating evil means that evil in my life, evil that has clogged the wheels of my life up to this point, maybe is threatening to throttle me entirely.

It has been defeated. And if I become a faithful, baptized member of Jesus family, I have the right to say to evil, you have no part in my life. Okay, you may still be grasping at my heels and pull me back from time to time.

But I am part of God's new creation project in which is going forward, whether the powers of evil like it or not, which they don't, and they will try to strike back. But Jesus has won the victory over them. And we in Christ, in the body of Christ, because it often takes the prayers and support and fellowship of the whole church to enable individuals fully to experience this.

We are to be renewed human beings, creative, pro-creative, to take our part within God's new creation. And that can only happen because the evil which otherwise would have thwarted it all has been dealt with on the cross. So, and this is a way of saying, yes, to every human being, man, woman, and child who comes to Jesus, there is this new vocation, your sins are dealt with.

And it's not just, therefore, you now go to heaven. Far more, you are part already of the new creation, and you get to share in advance in the creativity and possibility of God's ultimate new world. And you use this phrase of defeating evil just as much as you use the phrase forgiveness.

And I think that perhaps helps with, I mean, this additional question of Isaac, that there are many cases where Jesus was able to forgive people's sins while he was alive on the earth. So, why did he need to die? Isaac, couldn't God have just forgiven in the way that Jesus forgave people there in that? It's a larger project. It's that within that whole sweep of narrative, which is rushing towards the cross, and you can feel the energy of that rush in the four gospel narratives.

That's where it's all going. But then, its meaning spills out in all directions. And to think that because Jesus hasn't died yet, therefore people can't be forgiven, kind of misses the point.

That's trying to put that wind into a bottle. Of course, there are things which can't happen yet because Jesus hasn't died yet, very dramatically in John chapter 7. Jesus promises the Holy Spirit, and John says the Spirit was not yet. The Greek is extraordinary.

Upo-ga-ane-p-duma, because Jesus was not yet glorified. In other words, had not been raised up on the cross in this way to reveal the glory and love of God. And then when Jesus has died and been raised, then the Spirit is poured out.

So, there are ambiguities in the situation of people in between. You know, when Mary Magdalene is healed and restored and forgiven, but Jesus hasn't yet died and been raised. Has she got the Spirit? Well, God's Spirit is always at work, but God's Spirit is then poured out in a new way after Jesus' death and resurrection.

There are to be sure mysteries in that sequencing and overlap. But I wouldn't get hung up on that. Look at the big narrative and thank God for where we are in that big narrative right now.

Well, we now come to a few questions and I'm going to lump them all together, which, and you've referred to these already, but this larger question of, well, what did Jesus' death achieve then in our world today? So, here's one example from Jim in Ashburn, Virginia, who asks, "If the powers of darkness were destroyed on the cross, why is there still so much sin? Clarence and Albins, as a believer, of course, I'm overjoyed that the resurrection of our Lord inaugurated the kingdom of God on earth. Yet everything is so awful, there's so much injustice. There are no signs of things getting any better.

Why aren't there more signs of the reality which Christians believe to be true? Why didn't the inauguration herald a better, more just world? And in like Matt and Brett in Abbot's Fudd, Canada says, "I love Tom's theology. Love all the stuff on the kingdom of God." But I have a problem. He says, "In and through the resurrection, the world is a different place.

The power of sin and idols has been broken and a new way of being human has been opened up. Although I agree with this and that this is what the Bible teaches, I then look at the world and I don't feel it looks as though we're in this age that Tom claims." So there's this sort of disparity that people are feeling between this claim that the death and resurrection of Jesus heralded this new age, this new reality, if you like, the defeat of evil and so on. But you look at our world and you might ask yourself, "Well, it doesn't look very different to me." So yeah, where do you go with this, Tom? Oh my, yes.

Two or three starting points. One of which is what I would call the platonic captivity of the church. And I get more strident about this the older I get because I see it all over the place.

That because the church in the Western world and sadly in the Eastern world as well has tended to concentrate on the heavenly future, it's often thought that therefore we don't need to bother about the present world. And indeed I've heard people say, "Oh, we leave that to the social workers and the politicians. That's not our job because we have a better future, etc, etc." And I read the Gospels and I think Jesus doesn't seem to be taking that attitude at all.

Jesus, in his manifesto in Nazareth in Luke chapter 4, is talking about the fulfillment on earth as in heaven of the great Old Testament promises to bring God's justice to bear on the injustices of the world. And when we look at the Sermon on the Mount, and actually the Sermon on the Mount would be one of the best answers to this whole question. We don't see, therefore as soon as I've done what I have to do, everything will be different.

Rather we see this is what it will look like to be kingdom people, be poor in spirit, be mourners, be brokenhearted, be hungry for justice, be peacemakers, do all these things. This is how God's kingdom is supposed to come on earth as in heaven, not by a sudden flash and God as it was sending in the tanks and wiping every opposition off the face of the earth. Rather by Jesus followers doing as he did in the power of his spirit and transforming the world.

And here's one of the other major starting points. We in the modern western world have been sold a lie by the 18th century Enlightenment, the lie being that Christianity was part of the problem, not part of the solution. And so ever since the 18th century there has been a litany, which I've heard again and again about the crusades and the burning of witches and misogyny in the church and dah dah dah dah, a list of all the bad things the church has done.

So the church gets put on the debit side and then we in the modern enlightened west, we have to give up all that stuff because we now know how the world ought to be. Well, I want to say excuse me when we look back at the 20th century, let alone the 21st and I'm speaking and recording this shortly after the debacle in Afghanistan, then can we really say that we the enlightened west actually have an agenda for making the world a better place? A third starting point I'll tell you where you see the kingdom of God at work. In the 1970s again and again whenever South Africa was on the news, the news readers would talk about the coming bloodbath.

It was assumed that the black peoples of southern Africa would rise up and there would be a huge civil war and tens of thousands of people would be killed and who knows what was going to happen. That didn't happen because people like Desmond Tutu and many other lesser known but still important, Christian people were praying, were reading the

Bible with government ministers, etc, etc and were working for truth and reconciliation and the thought that you'd have a black archbishop, chairing a commission for truth and reconciliation, would have been unthinkable, is still sadly unthinkable in Northern Ireland or the Middle East or whatever today. But that is one sign and there have been many others that there are great things happening and here's my third preliminary point and then I'll shut up and we'll come to some of yours perhaps.

But in terms of news media, the news media in the western world, particularly national news media, not so much local, ignore what the church is doing and highlight problems and scandals. If a member of the senior clergy is found either in a sexual misdemeanor or in a financial scandal, the newspapers are all over it. If something wonderful is done, a community regeneration project with actual lasting and healthful results doesn't get a peep in the newspapers and so we are constantly being fed this lie and we have through the local churches to remind ourselves again and again, as Tom Holland has done in his work, that the church has actually transformed the way that people look at things.

Forgiveness was never a virtue in the ancient world. Forgiveness is now regarded by much of the human race as something which even though it's difficult, maybe we ought to try to aspire to it, a reconciliation likewise. When we look at today's power politics, we should say yes, but the fact is we have had a glimpse of a different kind of power, a Jesus-shaped power and there are many countries that are trying to follow that in no doubt very imperfect ways, but the church has to be on the front foot and say, this is what the kingdom of God is going to look like and we've got to work for it and pray for it.

I suppose that what I often get from questions like this is it's, you know, people I think would agree that there are good things that the church does of course and those who are historically minded may even acknowledge the enormous difference there is actually today from ancient times in the way we just regard humans and equality and all of that which as you said people like Tom Holland had done a great job of showing the Christian roots of that, but yet people I still think feel shouldn't be better than it is shouldn't we be further down the line and that sort of thing. And I would agree, I would absolutely agree and that's as I say I get hugely frustrated when I hear sermons as I do not in the church where I normally worship but elsewhere of people who are still preaching a platonic message about here's how we go to heaven kind of soothing people down and then with little hints about how we behave today. Well little hints is better than nothing but actually the church has an agenda which we ought to be knocking on the doors of the White House or number 10 Downing Street or wherever it is and saying look here's actually a policy statement about this particular issue whether it's the problem of homelessness, whether it's the problem of the Middle East, whatever and the church has been timid and has failed to see that in the power of the spirit our task is to hold up a mirror to power to say this is who the Creator God is and this is what he's calling you to.

John 16 when the spirit comes he will convict the world of sin and righteousness and

judgment and how will God do that how will the Spirit do that through the church reminding the world of what the truth really is. We've hardly begun to do that little bits here and there the Desmond Tutus and so on they matter but many many other things to get to work on. A lot to do but we're called to do it as you say in God's Spirit and we do believe the example of Jesus his death of resurrection is our model for how we live and act in the world so it is which means it'll be painful and dangerous indeed thank you for the time Tom today I hope it's been helpful for those who have been asking the questions and we'll see you again next time.

Thank you for listening next time we'll be looking at family matters including a question around the sector me should I get one just a reminder that our show partner Tom's UK publisher SBCK have some special deals on Tom's books for podcast listeners you can find a link with today's show notes and you can find out more about the show at our web page askentiright.com if you're able to support the show and help others discover Tom's thought and theology then we'll send you an exclusive show ebook 12 answers to questions about the Bible life and faith again that's askentiright.com and click on give you can also find links to this year's unbelievable conference and Tom's teaching there for now thanks for listening and see you next time

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