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#169 Broken Signposts and questions on forgiveness and salvation

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

From 2020: Tom talks about his book "Broken Signposts" and answers listener questions around how God forgives, conversion and how you can be sure you're saved.

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Transcript

Hello, Ruth Jackson here from Premier Insight. Before we begin today's program, did you know that you can receive ongoing encouragement from Premier Insight right into your inbox? When you sign up for email updates from Premier, you will receive resources and content to help you stand strong in your faith and live for Christ in your everyday life. Plus, you'll have the chance to win an amazing bundle of five books which includes mere Christianity, reason for God, surprised by hope, He is there and he is not silent, and the road to daybreak.

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(music) The Ask NTY Anything podcast.

(music) Hello and welcome to Ask NTY Anything. I'm with Jackson and today we're going back into the archives from 2020 to look at another of Tom's very popular books, Broken Signpost.

Tom, talk to Justin Blyley about the book and answers listener questions around how God forgives, conversion and how you can be sure that you're saved. Let's join them. Don't forget if you want to ask NTY Anything then subscribe to our newsletter at premierunbelievable.com and we'll send you the link to submit your questions as well as giving you access to hours of bonus content.

(music) Well it's a real joy to be joined by Tom again for today's edition of the show and Tom we're going to be talking about various issues around salvation comes up an awful lot in the questions that come in from from various folks. Now I've mentioned it, Broken Signpost. It's the new book, at least in the UK edition, the subtitle is How Christianity Makes Sense of the World.

Tell us a little bit about the latest book then. What's it all about? Okay, this grew out of a couple of other things that I've done. Some of the listeners may be familiar with my book Simply Christian where I start off with four things that I call echoes of a voice, things that are around in the culture in the air, what it means to be human that we're all interested in justice and relationships and spirituality and beauty and that they seem to be beckoning us and calling to us but they don't quite take us all away as it were.

Many people have seen them as signs of maybe there is a God and maybe this is what it's all about but then the beauty fades and justice is denied and our best relationships let us down or end in death and so on. And so I let that hang there at the beginning of Simply Christian but the thought didn't go away and the more I lived with it, the more I wanted to add three others as well, namely freedom and truth and power. So now there are seven of these, which I now call signposts.

And the reason I call them broken is because they look as if they're pointing to God or to the meaning of life, but they do all let us down freedom notoriously one person's freedom is produced at the cost of another person's slavery, etc. And I was thinking about all that in relation to another project the Gifford lectures that I did a couple of years ago published now as history and eschatology. And so I think that the idea of broken signposts and only perhaps in a somewhat more academic mode, but the key insight for me was this, and this explains why the book then took the shape it did that when we think about justice being such a wonderful thing, but it always seems to be

denied a wonderful thing, but it always gets trampled on and power being such a necessary thing, but it always gets abused and so on and so on.

I suddenly realized that I'm talking about the story of Jesus going to his death on the cross that as you read particularly in John's gospel. And there's a story about Pontius Pilate flagrantly denying justice trampling on freedom, rubbishing the idea of truth what is truth and so on, and also that the beauty which is there in the, the wonderful stories in John's gospel seems to go horribly dark as Jesus died and the relationship which he has with his disciples that gets denied because Judas betrays him and Peter denies him and so on. So suddenly I had this sense of maybe this is part of why the story of the cross is so powerful, because it tells us that these signposts are true signposts in other words, we are not living in a Jean Paul Sartre universe where everything is just a sick joke and doesn't mean anything.

These are true signposts, but it isn't the case that they're pointing up to God and we have to try to ratchet ourselves up to get to God through them, rather God has come down to the place where in our midst, all the signposts are broken and the cross sets up a new sort of signpost, a signpost which says, these really do matter and God has come into your midst to take an our brokenness upon himself. So that was the train of thought, which I found very powerful when I thought it I still find quite powerful So what I did with this book and I've never done this in any other book was to line up the seven signposts and talk about them, but to do so in relation to one particular New Testament text and the obvious one for me was and is John's gospel, so that each of the signpost justice spirituality relationships beauty etc And then I set up the question and then I say let's see what John might have to say about this, and I found as I did that it opened up all sorts of new pathways into John's gospel and some readers have told me already that it's done so for them as well So I put in between the chapters little to a three page hints on how to read John, so my hope is that at one level this book will present quite a different sort of argument a kind of apologetics but not the way we normally do it for saying here are all these things in the book, which all seem to point to God, but in fact God has come down to the place where they're all broken, but then also it functions as an introduction to reading John's gospel that maybe if we come with these things in our minds and read John either at a run or a little But in the book we might get all sorts of things out of that amazing book which we hadn't got before, so the whole thing kind of ties together and of course it is all about Jesus in a sense everything I write is all about Jesus or I hope it is And I'm already getting very interesting feedback from as I say friends who've read it and been able to get the idea resonates very strongly with me. I love the subtitle as well how Christianity makes sense of the world because for me that is the way I think of my apologetics actually it's not that I have to prove something in some irrefutable way, but I look at the evidence that's out there and I say what makes best sense of this does does a naturalistic atheistic account of the world or does a theistic and specifically Christian account and for me these signposts as you call them justice love spirituality beauty

freedom truth power.

I mean these are all things people do believe in even if they don't believe in God even if they don't believe the Christian story. There's something we can agree that things are important in the world, but the question is how do we explain them and for you are evidently Christianity makes a better sense of these things And that sense of making better sense that sense of an aha is is I think a very powerful argument if it is an argument or at least a demonstration. And of course the tradition of doing it this way it goes back to CS Lewis in mere Christianity he starts off with justice with the fact that in a playground one child will say to another that's not fair.

In other words you don't have to have a master's degree in comparative philosophy or ethics in order to know that there is this sort of thing called justice and that often it goes wrong. It's something which is deep in our human DNA and likewise for the other things we've talked about. Wonderful.

Thank you very much for a short intro to the book Tom broken signposts is available now by SBCK probably published I assume by your US publisher. One in San Francisco in the USA will make sure there's a link from today's show to where you can get hold of the book. Let's leap into the questions on today's topic salvation the cross something we've as I've say covered before in various ways but why don't we go straight in for Ashley's question in London.

Ashley says I would classify myself as a Catholic Christian however I don't fully believe in the Bible does that mean I'm not a Christian. There are so many denominations and I feel that religion has too many different views therefore if you believe in God and are a good person then you're still a person of faith. Could you let me know your views on this please well there's probably a few gaps will have to fill in here.

I mean my heart goes out to Ashley because because I know many people who are in exactly this position and there's a sense of yes I'm not a disbeliever I'm not an atheist I do believe in God and I'm doing the best I can and kind of struggling along. I would say the question of whether you fully believe in the Bible depends on so many other things that we've all heard somebody say oh you know you can't be sure that Jonah was really swallowed by a whale or whatever. Oh my goodness maybe I don't believe the Bible and so I would say that's not the place to start the place to start is with Jesus.

The put Jesus in the middle of the picture as he is at the climax of the picture in the whole biblical story you know if you read the Old Testament it kind of ends with question marks what's going to happen now is this great dream of Abraham and Isaiah and the Psalms is it all going to be for nothing. And then the New Testament is written in such a way as to say this is where it was all going here it is look at this amazing figure and let him look at you. And then if in the light of that you discover that you are reading the Bible differently and it does all make sense so that it's not a matter of do I don't I believe

in the Bible it's as I am trying to learn more about Jesus and reading this amazing book.

I can see bits sort of making sense around me and making sense of me. That's far more important than an intellectual belief or disbelief in the Bible. And also it kind of brings into sharp focus what a belief in God might look like.

I mean one of the things we've had to realize I think more people do realize this now is that the word God is not univocal. That is to say the word God means different things to different people and it always has done in the ancient world there were many gods and they behaved differently and you had gods for this purpose and gods for that purpose the God of the sea the God of war the God of love the God of shopping whatever it was. And they were different and when the Bible talks about the God, it's very specifically this is the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob who is the creator God and actually he is the only one who deserves the name God.

And then we discover scarily that you find out who this God is by looking at Jesus and that remains one of the biggest personal theological intellectual challenges ever but it makes so much sense because when Jesus is in the middle of the picture and the more we read Matthew Mark Luke and John, the more we get this I think then the other things that we vaguely believe or that we're struggling with how to live whatever these things come into focus. So yes if you believe in God and if you're a good person then you probably are still a person of faith but if that faith isn't anchored in Jesus it can wander around all over the place and the vision of God may be different and the vision of what it means to be a good person may be different as well. And you don't have to live very long in the real world before you discover that people's views of what it is to be a good person do well absolutely wildly.

I mean just to kind of come back just to the core and I suppose just to boil it down freshly if she's asking am I a Christian, how would you encourage someone like Ashley to simply what sort of could they ask themselves or look at themselves and say yes actually I am a Christian because what what are the signs if you like. I think I mean the signs are something to do with Jesus and because we're all different personality wise for some people that will at once be a warm rush a sense of Jesus knows me and I love him and we have this thing and yes that's that's tremendously important for others who don't approach life and relationships in the same way for personality reasons it may be more about reading the story of Jesus and finding that he gradually makes sense of so many other things but Jesus has got to be in the middle of the picture if you take Jesus out of the picture then the word Christian simply wouldn't mean the same thing at all. The clues in the name isn't it yes.

Well the clues in the name exactly exactly although still in British culture at least the word Christian for some people just means a nice sensible decent upstanding person certainly that's when I was growing up in the 1950s people use the word Christian to

mean you know a decent sort of person who you trust irrespective of their views about God and Jesus but I think we've got probably beyond that now. Look let's go from London to California Matt asks love all you do podcast and books but this is Matt's question is about forgiveness and did Jesus need to die on the cross in order for the sins that he forgave beforehand to be forgiven Matt says I've heard it is his death that forgives them yet he seemed to be forgiving since before his death in the gospel accounts and I've heard why why why are different explanations for this so what's going on with the sins that Jesus apparently forgives before his actual atoning death on the cross. Yes of course we can be very mechanical about this and I sense that this question comes out of a slide into a sort of mechanical view as though something happened and before then there was no forgiveness and after then there was and it's quite clear from the stories in the gospels and from the stories in the whole Old Testament but that's simply not the case that if you look at the great stories the great prophecies of Isaiah or Joseph forgiving his brothers in Genesis there's a sense that forgiveness is always God's gift to God's people but there's a sense in which as it were for that to make sense ultimately something had to happen which would retrospectively validated which would retrospectively sign off on all the forgiveness that had been characteristic in the lives of God's people before.

I mean when you take the exile in Babylon the exile in Babylon is seen in terms of God's punishment for Israel's idolatry and sin which is why in say the book of laments which is lamenting the fact that they're in Babylon etc. The promise comes through in laments God has forgiven your sins he will keep you in exile no longer and the return from exile functions as the sign that God has forgiven Israel's sins. That's so in the famous passage in Isaiah 40 as well.

Comfort, comfort my people because your sins have been dealt with and you're free to go home. So if we say how did that happen the prophet Isaiah says well it's to do with the servant of the Lord and this strange picture in Isaiah 53 about the one who suffered and was despised and rejected and wounded for our transgressions and so on. And it's as though the prophet is aware that sooner or later something has got to happen through which this will mean what it already means.

And I don't think we need to worry too much about God's time scale but it's as though God knows from the beginning that this is going to happen that the servant is going to give his life as a ransom for many. And that on the basis that it is going to happen then forgiveness can be announced in advance and is so so it isn't a problem for me about when Jesus then announces forgiveness for people during the course of the gospel, though it raises the question at the time who is this that forgive sins. What's he talking about how can you do this and the gospel writers say well look at him as he goes to the cross look at him as God raises him from the dead, then you'll see that it's all because of that retrospectively that everything that went before makes sense.

Hello, Ruth Jackson here from Premier Insight. I want to pause for a moment to tell you

about a powerful resource that we have put together called biblical sexuality. With gender being such a hot topic today, this special resource is designed to help you to understand sexuality from a biblical perspective and confidently engage in conversation on these issues with those who hold a different view.

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Thank you. Now questions around forgiveness and if you like who the forgiveness is for are often come about, especially when it comes to a sort of Calvinistic interpretation of who is the elect. I've got two related questions here on what sometimes technically called limited atonement and perhaps you can give what you think is the definition of that, Tom.

But let me read them first of all, Seth out in Clarkson, Kentucky says while there are many different views of the atonement such as penal substitution etc. There's always been the theological conflict of Calvinism and Armenianism, the thought that Christ died solely for the elect or that Christ died for all people. What do you think? Who's right? Who's wrong? And John in Adelaide, Australia has a similar question.

This comes with a sort of pastoral dimension says I'm losing my evangelistic zeal due to my embrace of definite atonement. Perhaps what he means here is, you know, more commonly called limited atonement in the sort of tulip acronym. And John says I acknowledge that for God to save anyone at all is an act of mercy.

I also understand that God is under no obligation to save anyone. Therefore, I see God's redemption of even just one person as a beautiful thing. Yet I still find myself aching inside because I want to be able to look at anyone in the street and know in my heart that they are someone for whom Christ died.

This seems to me a more beautiful truth. Yet I cannot affirm that because I don't know for sure if Christ has died for them. I've been interested to hear your take on this and how come I'll be fervent in evangelism in light of this view.

So what do you make of this idea of limited atonement Christ only died for some? I had never heard of this view until I was a student here in Oxford in the late 60s, early 70s. And I ran into some people who became good close friends and we worked together and prayed together. Some of whom have been reading some of the 17th century Puritans for whom limited atonement.

The idea of Christ dying only for the elect was absolutely central on the grounds that unless you could say that then Christ's death was as it were a gesture of possibility rather than an achievement of something definite and absolute, which is why here it's called definite atonement. And I have a friend to this day close friend who will still argue for this and we'll talk about in terms of specific atonement or complete atonement or something that this is what God determined to do. Now, though in the case of that friend and of others that I've mentioned, I don't think this ever actually resulted in a slackening of evangelistic zeal.

But the older I've got, and I hope this doesn't sound sort of typical old man thing to say, the more I've been reading the Bible in its original context in the context of the first century Jewish world inhabited by Jesus inhabited by Paul, which is radically, radically different in the way it's thought from the 16th and 17th century in Europe in Britain in Germany in Holland and so on, where some of these things were being hammered out in the 16th and 17th century. And I find myself now looking at those questions as between is it Calvin or is it Armenia's it's got to be one or the other in the same way as the famous old joke which we may have said to each other before about somebody on somebody from the Indian subcontinent finding themselves in Belfast on a dark night and being set upon by a gang of youths saying, are you a Catholic or a Protestant and he says no, I'm a Hindu I'm a Hindu and the answer is, are you a Catholic Hindu or a Protestant Hindu and you know this question just doesn't work like that and we need a larger frame. So when I then find in 2 Corinthians 5 for instance, some Paul saying, we know that one died for all therefore all died, we say well Paul does that mean you're a universalist and Paul says absolutely not of course not, you can tell from every letter he writes that he thinks there is a definite sense that this is not an automatic done deal that all we can do now is sit back and say Christ died for everybody, so we're all going to heaven isn't that nice.

And that's why I and some of my other works I've tried to probe into more deeply into the meaning of Christ dying for sinners. And what that actually then does and part of the problem is that the Calvin versus our minion thing and the definite or limited atonement thing comes out of a concentration on this forensic legal aspect of atonement which is there, which is part of the deal, but often to the exclusion of what is known in the trade as the Christmas Victor strand which is God winning the victory over the powers of sin and darkness and death through the representative substitutionary death of Jesus. And if we do that we put more weight onto this legal framework did it work like this or did it work like that.

And then we get into these puzzles whereas if we say as I tried to argue in my book the day the revolution began that God is going to defeat the policies and powers that have held us captive that have enslaved us, but the way they have enslaved us is because when we sin, we make over our power to them as it were. And so when God deals with our sin he robs the idols of their power. This is hugely important in say John 12 or

Colossians to or Hebrews to various passages and it's actually part of the whole messianic victory of Jesus, which is what all four gospels are about Jesus goes to the cross to win the messianic victory and he does that through substitution.

But if you take substitution out of that context and make it a thing in itself, then you get into this false either all. This is, yes, but are you a Calvinist or an Armenian. So I'm afraid there's no easy answer except to say please, at this moment in our history as Christians, let's stop allowing the controversies of the 16th and 17th century to define who we have to be.

Let's read the Bible for all its worth in its own context. And even if that de familiarizes ourselves up to a point. Please let's then work with that and see a larger vision within which the things which are often polarized against one another may actually be held together.

And when we do that, the thing which comes through to me again and again is Paul saying the son of God loved me and gave himself for me. And okay that's very definite in particular. The Paul doesn't mean just for me.

This for Paul, go back to second Corinthians five again, the love of the Messiah constrains us because it's an overflowing love, and you can't limit it. The idea of limiting God's rescuing love is just almost blasphemous is ridiculous. So we need to be able to rethink these great swathes of biblical theology.

And I would say the tools to do so are there in the first century, but don't let ourselves be imprisoned by the thought forms of the 16th and 17th century, or for that matter the 19th and the 20th either. So on a practical level for, you know, just briefly for, especially I think for John's question, which is this this one about his evangelistic zeal being dampened down by this question of did Christ die for the person I'm walking past on the street. How would I know.

I mean what would you say is how should John rethink John should see this person walking past to somebody who's made in the image of God, who God is calling and longing to to remake in his image. So that they will reflect his glory into the world and reflect the praises of creation back to its maker. That's what every human being was made for.

And God in his love wants to reach out and do that to enable that. And if some staunch Calvinist comes back and says, but this is a very weak view of God because if God wants to do that why can't God do it. And are you saying that God is just merely making it possible rather than actual.

I say this again is the imposition of probably a 17th century philosophy. And when I look at the gospel stories of Jesus, do I see Jesus making things merely possible. Well, yes, he

says to the rich young ruler, here's how to do it come and follow me and give up all your stuff.

And the man goes away. Was Jesus failing then? No, because that's what love does. Love reaches out.

And if people say no, not for me, thanks, that is still the victory of love reaching out, even though it doesn't have the consequences it might have wanted. So I get the sense then, Tom, that you do believe this is an invitation that is open to all. But not all will necessarily embrace.

Exactly. I don't think all do embrace it because I'm not a universalist. I've never been universalist because I think the New Testament is full of quite stark warnings about those who do such things will not inherit God's kingdom, etc, etc, which apply to practicing Christians as much as anybody else, not that we can be once saved and then lost, but that it's only in the perseverance and the constant daily dying to sin, etc, that you discover who is really following Jesus all along.

Final question here from Timothy in Ontario, Canada says, I'd like to hear Tom's thoughts on the idea of conversion. I've grown up in an evangelical Protestant tradition and conversion seems to be considered the quintessential Christian experience. This idea seems to undergird much of our culture, teaching and music.

We're frequently encouraged to share our testimony, which seems to be code for our story of conversion. But I was raised as a Christian. I've never been anything else.

Is it possible that we've over universalised this experience? Might there be a case to be made for a second or third generation faith? The lyrics I once was lost, but now I'm found was blind, but now I see don't actually seem to fit with my life story. So, yes, it's not that I don't think Timothy is at all worried that he isn't quote unquote saved, or a Christian. He hasn't had a conversion experience.

Yeah, yeah. I very much get that. And I'm in the same boat.

I grew up in a very undemonstrative and unshowy, but definitely Christian household. And it was assumed that you said your prayers and you entered church and we read our Bibles, etc. And it grows upon you and you discover that you're in a world where praying is what you do.

And yes, that for me, there have been various crises and various problems where I've had to say, "Oh my goodness, I think I need to say, okay, here I am, take my life in a whole new way." But that's part of maybe hitting puberty, maybe hitting young adulthood, that there are crisis moments in anybody's life, but the Christian faith has been there all along. So I'm in the same boat as Timothy here. I was really helped by hearing the late great J. Lapaca say something when I was a student, which is that it's

easy to get fixated on the idea of conversion.

But what matters is convertedness, i.e. it's not about whether you've had this or that or the other experience. It's where you now are as a result. Are you with Jesus? Are you En Christo in Messiah? Are you baptized and believing follower of Jesus? Are you one who is pressing on for the upward call of God in Christ Jesus? Because if all those are true, then doesn't matter what happened as Paul says, forgetting what lies behind, straining forward for what lies ahead.

I actually listened this morning. A friend sent me a podcast link, a YouTube link to the baptismal testimony of a friend of hers just from this last weekend. And it was very moving.

This was a person who'd been right away from anything Christian or whatever, and God brought her wonderfully back. And I love to hear those stories. And one of the reasons I love to hear them is that I don't have a story like that myself, but I know that God regularly does that in people's lives.

And that's entirely God's business. But I thank God that I and many others that I know have been finding ourselves in this state of convertedness in the sense of having the Holy Spirit, welling up within us, leading us to repent of sin and to follow Jesus. And so on and so on and so on.

That's how it's been for us. And so it seems to me that when Timothy says that it's under God's much of our culture teaching music, yes, that often is the case in certain churches particularly. But of course there are many other churches where if you say join a choir which is singing Handel's Messiah, that's the great biblical story.

At no point does that say, now what about you, where are you on this map? It's just, we're all singing hallelujah together. Let's not bother how we got there. Let's enjoy the music.

Yes. I mean, I once was blind, but now I see obviously for the author of that hymn was very significant. John Newton, Thomas slave trader and so on.

But, but obviously won't necessarily quite reflect everyone's story. There's going, I mean, I've always appreciated that that analogy that seriously was had for this. I may have been mentioned it on a previous podcast, but he said, a person get it's something like this anyway, a person gets on a train in Paris and to arrive in Berlin.

One of them gets on during the day and knows the exact moment that they cross the border. Another person takes the sleeper train, falls asleep in France, wakes up in Germany, doesn't know when they cross the border. The point is they've both arrived at the destination and that's the... That's very good.

Yes. That's very good. I'd forgotten that.

Where does Lewis say that? I can't remember now off the top of my head, but I've often used it to actually along these lines, my wife and I have quite different stories and mine is a bit wambam. I can tell you that the night when it all happens sort of conversion, Lewis is very much that I just grew into this childhood. But we're both at the same destination is the point.

That's great. Anyway, hope that's helped in some way for Timothy in Ontario. Time is against us and we're out of time.

It's been great chatting through these issues with you as usual, Tom. Goodbye. Thank you.

Thank you for listening. I do hope you enjoyed that replay from our archives. If you want to ask NTYN-thing, then subscribe to our newsletter at premierunbelievable.com and we'll send you the link to submit your questions as well as giving you access to hours of bonus content.

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