

OpenTheo

#30 Questions about marriage

February 12, 2020



Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom answers listener questions about marriage including: What will our married relationships look like in the new creation? What advice do you have for someone about to get married? What do you think about divorce? Can I get married to a non-Christian?

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Transcript

[Music] Premiere Podcast.

[Music]

[Music] The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

[Music] Hello.

Welcome back to the show with me Justin Brierley and Tom Wright. But we answer your questions. It's brought to you by Premiere in partnership with SBCK and NTYite online.

And today your questions on marriage. Of course you can ask your own question by registering over at the website. Ask NTYite.com and registering also gets you news, updates on the show, special offers, entry to our regular competition bonus videos and

much more.

That's Ask NTYite.com. There's also an option there to give and support the show. And as a thank you, we'll send you Tom's exclusive ebook from the show. This is new for 2020.

12 answers to questions about the Bible, life and faith. And thanks to all who have supported the show so far. Now a date for your diary.

Tom is going to be speaking on Jesus Paul and the question of God. A special evening event at Westminster Chapel on Thursday, the 12th of March. Tom is going to be leading you into the lives and times of Jesus and Paul.

And show how a better understanding of the world of the first century can lead to a better understanding of what they said and did. They'll have special reference to his three most recent works, The New Testament in its world, Paul Biography and History in eschatology. And we've talked to Tom about all of those books on this show.

And then I'll actually be sitting down with Tom after he's given his talk to interview them about the themes in it. After which he'll answer audience questions. So that's one you won't want to miss if you can get along.

On Thursday, the 12th of March. There's links from today's show if you'd like to go along. And of course that's not the only date for your diary.

Yes, spring is a bit of a Tom Fest because you can enjoy a whole day of Tom's thought and theology at Unbelievable the Conference 2020 on Saturday the 9th of May. Our theme is how to tell the greatest story ever told. And of course it'll include a live audience edition of this very show during the day.

That's again at Westminster Chapel on Saturday the 9th of May. The place to go Unbelievable.live to book your seat. But don't leave it too late.

The early bird prices won't be around forever. Other speakers include historian Tom Holland, Ruth Jackson, Sarah Lumgar, Bobby Conway, the one minute apologist and more. And if you can't get to London, we will be releasing the live streaming details in March as well.

But for now, if you can, book your seat over at Unbelievable.live. That's all the housekeeping out of the way. Let's get into today's show.

[MUSIC PLAYING] Well, today and in the next edition of the podcast, we're going to be looking at things of a more pastoral nature.

And I'm surprised in a way, Tom, at how many questions that come in that are pastoral, essentially. And it's probably important, as we have said before, to say anything that you deal with that's pastoral, obviously, you would rather people primarily seek a pastor they

can speak to, pray with, go on that journey with. Yes.

That is really important. I mean, I get emails from people saying, help help, I'm in this situation, et cetera. And my first thing is always, I cannot be your pastor online.

It's just not how pastoral work works. You need to be able to sit down in a quiet room with somebody who can pray with you, who can weep with you if you're weeping, and who can engage in a longer journey. Because though I like to solve things when they come through my door, almost all pastoral problems, if they're serious enough to come through the door of the study, are not going to be solved in one visit.

This is going to be a journey. We're going to have to go together. And obviously, I can't do that.

So with that caveat-- Yeah. We will try to give some general principles. Now, next week's will be a whole variety of pastoral questions.

But today, it's marriage. But before we get to the nuts and bolts of how we make marriage work, as Christians, a couple of people asked similar questions about marriage in the age to come. So Clayton in Melbourne, Australia, and Jenny in Virginia, they ask these questions.

With what I can only understand the Bible implies that as a married couple, we are to become as one. Yet, there seems to be verses that imply this is only for this earth, and what's your opinion? And Jenny says, I know we won't be married in heaven, but will I still remember my husband? And will we still be good friends like we are? Or maybe I should have just as vast where there will know our family and friends? So there's sort of both questions, I think, are keying on the idea of what will that age to come be like? They use the word heaven. I know that you maybe prefer to use a different word.

And we'll get to that. But I think the idea being, people thinking, well, will I still be, in some sense, related to that person in the life to come? Or will that somehow have evaporated? And what will that look like? Of course. And I mean, one of the fascinating things about the New Testament, unlike some religious books, ancient and modern, is its refusal to speculate beyond a very, very tiny distance into what the ages come will actually be like.

And Jesus is quite clear that it will involve resurrection. And in his debate with the Sadducees, that is very clear. And indeed, the Sadducees are pushing him on this kind of thing.

They're trying to kind of catch him out. Well, but on this question of supposing we have this woman who marries one brother than another than another, and then finally she dies too, whose wife is she going to be? And Jesus says that, that's missing the point. And the point that Jesus is making there is not, by the way, about going to heaven.

It's not just a different language, a different concept that, can I just do a riff on this? Go on then. Go from... In the 16th century, the Reformers were faced with the doctrine of purgatory, which had taken over the Western Medieval Church. And in order to combat that, they said, no, you don't have purgatory.

If you're a Christian, you go straight to heaven, because that was the choice either straight to heaven or vow purgatory. And they ignored, and I don't think that's too strong a word, and I think Carl Barten others will agree with me on this, the Reformers ignored the teaching about new heavens and new earth and a bodily resurrection into that new heavens and new earth after a time of being at rest. And the rest is called paradise, call it heaven if you like, though the New Testament doesn't use the word heaven for that.

But it'll be heaven and earth joined together. Otherwise we collapse into a formal Platonism. Okay, end of riff, but it's really important.

So what Jesus is saying is that in the New Age, we will no longer be mortal, we will no longer die. There will be no more death and therefore no need for reproduction. And therefore no need for ordinary marriage as we know it, which has procreation as one of its normal primary goals.

Obviously, there are many marriages where you don't have children, and that's okay too, which is another question that people do often ask as something gone wrong with me because dot dot dot. And it's very clear in Genesis 2, the man leaves his father and mother cleaves to his wife and their one flesh. And there's nothing about as long as they have children.

That they are who they are. That's really rather important. But normally this is part of the way in which under God or the normal means by which God renews the human population.

That won't be necessary in the age to come. And therefore, and this goes back to the early fathers, speculation about whether there will be any equivalent of what we currently know as sexual relations, or whether that will be something which, because it won't be necessary and required, we won't actually want to do or delight in it in the way we now do, etc, etc. That speculation were not told definitely about that.

Then we go to the question of the people that we've loved and lost. Will we know them again? And there what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4 is really important because he is giving a word of comfort and he says that ultimately we will all be together. Now people have got hung up about that passage because it's the famous rapture passage.

And actually that's a misreading of that text. And it's much more important to say that Paul's point is God is looking after those who have died, our loved ones who've gone before us. And they and we will be together in God's new age.

And there's no question of, "Oh dear, will we know them? Will we recognize them?" It's assumed that it will be a glorious mutual welcome and recognition. But of a sort which and inner mode which we at present can only distantly imagine. And this is where I go back to the whole question of music, that it seems to me one of the things that music does, is to open up the possibility of imagining of other worlds where different things happen and different possibilities are there.

We need all those imaginative resources. Not that we can then draw an exact picture of what it's going to be like, but that we can be assured that God having made us and loved us and redeemed us in Christ and in dwelt us by the Holy Spirit is not going to forget us, is not going to regard the love which we have presently shared as, "Oh, that's just a temporary blip and you're all going to be anonymous from now on." Far from it, we're going to be more vividly ourselves than we've ever been before. And I understand the sentiment that for instance, Jenny has about, "Will I still remember my husband? Will we still be friends?" There's a sense in which this is so important to me here and now in my life.

Of course. Why wouldn't it be important to me then? Of course. But you're saying in some sense that that will be both fulfilled and transcended.

Yeah, C.S. Lewis says, "I think it's in the Great Divorce," or one of those, or possibly screed hablaters, "that the loves that we will retain are the loves that have been subject to the cross and resurrection in the present life." In other words, if we tried to cling on to something and idolise it, then that grip may have to be broken. But a good, healthy, outgoing, normal human love is a God-given gift and God doesn't give gifts like that in order to snatch them away. And it's been helped for me when I've been thinking through this because obviously, some people do get married and others don't.

Paul, as far as we're in it, was never married, Jesus was never married, but were fully human and loved by God. But the greatest marriage is going to be that final one, the picture of which we have as the marriage supper of the lamb. And for me, I've always felt like all of these things that we experience in this life to use another Lewis metaphor are shadows compared to that ultimate marriage, that ultimate thing within which we'll see all of these relationships as having had there.

Yes, I'm sure that's right. I mean, the danger of the shadows metaphor is that can take you back to Plato again. But yes, exactly.

And there are deep and rich friendships as well, sometimes which seem to be friendships which are on a different plane entirely from marriage and sometimes very vivid. And I don't mean sort of quasi-erotic alternative friendships, just rich friendships for sort which our Western world has largely forgotten, actually. But it can be very close and very meaningful.

And again, it seems to me that bond of love is a gift of God, which isn't going to be just, oh, that was just playing around, we're not going to do that anymore. Well, let's move from the age to comes at the age where we currently inhabit. And the complexities that obviously exist when it comes to relationships, marriage, and so on, is just some practical advice being asked for by Joshua in Rochester, Texas, says, "Thank you for the wonderful teachings and writings.

They've been incredibly helpful to me in my ministry here in rural Texas. I pastor a small Baptist church and I'm getting married in June." Well, congratulations, because that date is obviously passed already. But you say, "I've lived alone.

What advice, firstly, would you give to a man, particular pastor, who's getting married in his 30s? I've lived alone for several years and I'm looking forward to building a marriage on the foundation of Jesus. What do you believe the best way is to do this?" And he says, "I can also throw in some advice to it all the way." But let's go to the one who has far, far more years of experience. It is a huge challenge and responsibility and it's, of course, both glorious and utterly demanding.

And yeah, Maggie and I have been married for 48 years. She sometimes wonders what she did wrong to deserve all that. But I think a lot of pastors' wives particularly would resonate with that.

And I think one of the things that we have learned and that many friends that we've got have learned in different ways is that whatever you think it's going to be like, actually it's going to be both more glorious and much harder. And I think particularly in the world of the early 21st century, there are so many cultural expectations which are still sloshing around but which have all been questioned and challenged. And as we grow and as we change and as we get to know one another and discover that this person who you love very deeply at one level is actually a more mysterious and sometimes rather strange and off-putting character that hadn't realized that because of course whenever you're close to anyone in a close friendship or even within a family, brothers and sisters, the more you get to know them, the more you realize, "I didn't know that," he thought like that.

I didn't expect her to say that. And the most mysterious people that we know are the ones we know best as it were. And which is a wonderful thing but also scary.

And that demands humility and it demands a willingness to say, "I thought life was meant to be like this. Clearly you think it's meant to be like that. Now can we negotiate that? Is there room for that negotiation? How do we do that? How do we address things?" And those are things to be learned.

And that's why I would always advise couples if it's at all feasible to have like you would regularly go to the doctor that enters for a checkup, to go every so often for a checkup to a wise, friendly, experienced pastor just to say, "This is where we are. We're not at

Death's Door. We're not going to the divorce courts." But we really want to make sure we're actually listening to each other and so on.

And that is demanding particularly because the other partner may suddenly blurt out something and you think, "I didn't realize you were feeling that all that time." And having the resilience to handle that is really important. But learning that resilience is important for later on down the track when difficult and bad things happen when you have a sick child or when something goes wrong financially or whatever it is. You need to build that trust.

And then to realize as well that the way we pray together now and an engaged Christian couple I would assume are at least starting to pray together. That may not be the way that we both develop and our sleep patterns may be different and we may need to have some separate times of prayer. That doesn't mean we're ignoring each other but especially for a pastor to figure out what church going is to be like.

Some pastors' wives love being pastors' wives and sitting in a particular pew with their children or friends or whatever, others find that very, very difficult. And to be prepared to be flexible and not assume that we know what these roles are going to be like and particularly to guard the time together and the days off and so on which I haven't always been good at doing myself but I've tried. So there's lots of advice like that.

I want to say go for it. Hope it's working out well. Yeah and from my perspective it with far less years under my belt of married life but it is.

It is about learning to sacrifice for the other person. Marriage is a constant battle of putting down your own wants for the sake of the other person and that's why obviously the marriage of Jesus and the church is cast in that way. It's a self-sacrificial thing which sounds great in theory but is very difficult in practice.

It's difficult in practice and I mean one of the things which I've written a lot about over the last 20 years is the faithfulness of God Paul and the faithfulness of God and somebody produced a book of essays about my book and it's called God and the Faithfulness of Paul and as I look at those titles I think yes faithfulness, reliability, trustworthiness, it bounces back at all of us and if we think faithfulness in this moment and to this person and for this is difficult imagine what it's like for God being faithful to us you know we mess up so often and so badly and yet God remains faithful that's what we're called to be. One of the best bits of advice I've ever had actually was the person who preached at our wedding was the chaplain of my wife's college at Oxford Trevor Williams. Oh yes, interesting.

And he said whatever you do let God be God in your marriage don't make the other person God. The greatest mistake people make is treating the other people as though they are going to be the answer to that probably. Interesting.

You're never the answer. Yeah, the other person. Let God be God and you be who you are.

Well, well, well, well, well, well, it's good. There you go. I hope you're enjoying today's show and the videos that we make available on the website.

Do please consider investing in the show. Your financial support helps us to cover our ongoing production costs and enables us to reach many more people with Tom's thought and theology. Go to askentiright.com and click on give and as a thank you, we'll send you Tom's brand new Ask, Entiright, anything ebook.

It's called 12 Answers to Questions About the Bible, Life and Faith. Read his answers to some of the most significant questions posed in the past year. Anything you give helps us to continue this show strong into 2020 and enables us to help more people to make sense of faith and grow in Christian confidence.

Again, that's askentiright.com and click on give. Deena in Switzerland asks the next, perhaps obvious question, which is, what are your views on divorce and remarriage in Christianity? When is it allowed and could one distinguish between God's will versus man's in terms of what he tolerates from man given our obvious shortcomings? Where did you want to begin on this one? The New Testament is pretty clear that divorce is pretty well normally not what God wants and that's in the standard passages in Mark 10 and in parallels there and in 1 Corinthians 7 and that that is a demand for faithfulness, almost doggedness, etc. It's interesting because though in the Old Testament you do get passages say the same thing like Malachi.

God says I hate divorce. Where there it was a question of Jews who had got married young and now back in the land after the geographical exile there were all these other people around and some of them were bored with their present wives and so why not? Malachi says no absolutely not. Stay faithful to the wife of your youth.

But in the Old Testament there's all sorts of shenanigans going on about marriage and stuff and polygamy and so on. But in the New Testament part of the point of the gospel is that we are supposed to be in some way or other people of the new creation and that means as Jesus strongly emphasizes and as Paul strongly emphasizes one man, one woman for life. That is basic.

Now the permissions that are then given which are permissions rather than commands in Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount and then again in Matthew 19 it's in the case of unchastity, presumably adultery or some other sexual misbehavior of whatever it is that then if adultery is taken place that doesn't mean you have to divorce but it means that already within the community Jesus envisages and that Matthew is instantiating this is a possibility. Interestingly in those passages in Matthew there are lots we were talking in an earlier podcast about textual variations. There are lots of textual variations in the

manuscript tradition and it's as though the early church transcribing this stuff was a way that this was a really difficult thing but it seems to me when the crucial thing is that the Pharisees say to Jesus well so why then did Moses give us this thing about divorce and Jesus says because of the hardness of your hearts but from the beginning it was not that's a really tough saying because what that means is that Jesus is claiming to offer a cure for the hardness of heart.

Now as a pastor and as somebody has been married nearly half a century I know that hearts do not just get softened automatically overnight something has to be worked at, prayed out, struggled with, wept over etc. The other permission which is given in 1 Corinthians 7 is if a Christian and a non-Christian are married and the non-Christian really doesn't want this anymore perhaps in Corinth because I'm a citizen of Corinth we have these gods in our house and we have these gods down the street and we as a family are just going to do this stuff and the Christian just says well this is going to be really hard and the non-Christian says well in that case I'm out of this. Paul says in that case you are not bound you are not stuck in that.

I assume that in both those cases divorce because of unchastity and divorce because of Christian non-Christian this includes remarriage otherwise it isn't divorce it isn't including it's mere separation but so that's the principle but working that out in practice I know is tough. It's inevitably going to have to be a short answer to what is a huge area but I hope it's helped in some way Dina. Another one this is another tricky ethical question Madeline in Atlanta wants to ask about contraception.

She says should Christians use contraception other than natural family planning in married sex and is sex only for the purpose of procreation are there any ethical differences between types of contraception now I'm not expecting you to be here as a bi-notable collection expert or anything Tom but obviously feels that this is something you might be able to help at least from a biblical kind of perspective as to whether there is anything pertinent to this issue. There's not much in the bible about the sort of things that we know today about the use of medications or physical aids because that's just not what was available in the ancient world. It does seem to me that in Genesis in the song of songs and in various instances in the New Testament there is the mutual delight of the couple which is absolutely central and what little I think we know in terms of psychology as it were the act of sexual intercourse actually does as we used to say maybe not so often make love it can actually generate physical reactions which are loving towards this it's almost like those moments in a Shakespeare play where someone sprinkles very first person they see when they wake up etc I think that that is a reflection of something which is really true and that holds the marriage together and that's true whatever forms of contraception etc.

are being used seems to be sometimes contraception can be used selfishly we're just so enjoying being together we're not going to have any of those stupid little brats running

around being smelly. It seems to me in the present state of the world it's unwise possibly even disobedient to God's command to be stewards of creation that we all have limitless numbers of children you know my grandfather was one of 15 of whom 13 survived to adulthood and people had vast families because in the late 19th century Hooping Cough could carry them all off overnight and so they wanted there to be some children left. We now... What's your response then to perhaps some of our Catholic listeners I know we have a number who might feel that actually there is a you know an injunction on us to always make at least it possible for that act to result in in two ways.

I think that's an over-literalization like some other bits of teaching in my church as well which have sort of rather honed in on one thing and the idea within Roman Catholicism of the natural rhythm method actually when you talk to people who've tried to practice that is anything but natural it's all about thermometers and calendars and charts and so on and it's highly unromantic and I want to say we need to lighten up about this but in terms of rejecting the selfishness of sex is just for my pleasure and I don't want to have any children then we must reject that. Yeah and I suppose to some extent the sexual revolution did effectively divorce the sexual act from pro-creation and sure. Regardless of the specifics of contraception there's a sense in which it's become something different to what it perhaps yes yes always was considered to be.

Yes absolutely and and that's something we have to navigate very carefully because like a lot of other medical innovations that there was a great blessing in this poor woman who was expected to have another child every year whether she wanted one or not until she finally died at age 50 of sheer exhaustion and I want to stand with those women who say thank goodness we aren't bound to that any. Yeah Kendra in Tampa Florida and this will be our final question for this session has a very again pastoral practical question and again caveat supply Kendra that you we obviously want you to seek out good pastoral advice specifically but but here's the story says I'm a 38 year old Christian woman in a relationship with a wonderful man and we want to get married but he's not yet a believer. He attends church with me and though not opposed to my faith he doesn't believe it for himself.

When we first met I told him I would not marry someone who didn't share my commitment to Jesus but in our question if marrying an unbeliever would be disobedient to the Lord or not. When I discuss this with other believers from the Baptist church I attend they always bring up two Corinthians 6:14 about not being unequally yoked but is this the one passage really about marriage and he'll does it or any other scripture mean that marriage to an unbeliever is sinful I'm well aware that marrying an unbeliever will inevitably create greater strain and hardship on the marriage but God leads us down difficult roads all the time. I want to know if God instructs directly against marrying an unbeliever or if this is one of those decisions left up to us to work out with him on a case by case basis.

Wow yeah my heart goes out to somebody in that situation who's obviously of a certain age and maybe thinking you know biological clock ticking and all of that. The first thing I think I really do want to say is that marriage in the 21st century in the western world is tough. Anything that makes it tougher is going to be hard and it really is going to be hard and this isn't just a matter of oh we love each other so much it'll work out you know that there are big difficulties here and marriage between two devout Christians is hard and the fact that you pray together you go to church together and you read the bible together doesn't mean that it isn't hard and if you don't have that then that's tough and the casualty rate is high.

Now in the New Testament it isn't just 2 Corinthians 6 it's also that very interesting little flicker in 1 Corinthians 7 when Paul says that somebody whose first husband has died is free to marry again and then he says only in the Lord and it's rather like the Jewish endogamy which is to say you marry in the Jewish world so Paul sees the Christian family as a family and that you marry in the family. Now so that's Paul however and this is a curious thing not a lot of people know this but in the early church on to the second and third century one of the reasons that Christianity spread was that there were more Christian women around than there were pagan women for the very simple but sad reason that pagans if they'd had one daughter already would get rid of any other ones they'd throw them to the wolves quite literally or they would sell them into slavery or whatever so there weren't that many non-Christian women comparatively with non-Christian men so many non-Christian men married Christian women and either converted themselves or at least let the wife bring the kids up as Christians so that that's one of the reasons why by the time of Constantine even though the church had been persecuted there were more and more Christians and eventually Constantine says okay you guys win now that's ambiguous but but so it's clear that if the church at that point it said no no we're not marrying non-Christians that wouldn't have happened but I think wisdom suggests that the putative husband there the possible husband there goes with you questioner to see your pastor to talk through this and to figure out if there are any things that can be explained about the faith and and why not if he loves her why doesn't he want to explore that and you know there are there are big questions to be asked there big questions obviously questions that Kendra fully anticipates and from just from reading her her brief question here I can see that she's she's not going into this blind no no quite quite obviously astral support and help is absolutely of the essence but there is on a purely practical level it's it's it's difficult I mean the average church here in the UK is probably spits to about two thirds women yes yes yes yes and there is that simple mathematical fact there aren't enough christian men to go around and so it's going to be in that sense much harder on on average christian women to find yes christian part yes yes and I can understand why this becomes such a yep pressing problem no it has it has been and is but I think if the husband thinks this is simply a hobby that my wife has then sorry this isn't just a hobby this is something that affects everything yeah I hope that's been helpful in some way Kendra there are never easy answers to these really you know

practical pastoral questions but do appreciate you getting in touch and all the others who've gone in touch with their questions on marriage this edition we cover all kinds of things don't we Tom off this podcast calm mechanics next week no we'll have to look we'll leave it there for this week's episode great to have you on the show thank you very much and whether you are married or not I hope that it's been a blessing to you and we'll see you next time thank you thanks for being with us next time we'll be answering more of your pastoral questions if you've enjoyed today's show do share it with others and leave us a rating in a review on your podcast provider and don't forget to catch Tom in London on Thursday the 12th of March and also to book your place for his appearance at unbelievable the conference in may just go and check the show notes or go to ask ntwrite.com for more info on that the giving links there too you can receive that free ebook from the show and of course get subscribed for the regular newsletter bonus content and prize draws and of course ask a question yourself see you next time you've been listening to the ask ntwrite anything podcast let other people know about this show by rating and reviewing it in your podcast provider for more podcasts from premiere visit premiere.org.uk/podcasts