

OpenTheo

#51 Pain and suffering Part 1

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom shares his thoughts on the difficult questions listeners have around issues such as dementia, death, the global pandemic and whether God himself suffers.

NT Wright speaking with Miroslaf Volf on weeping, waiting and working with God in the pandemic <https://faith.yale.edu/media/n-t-wright-on-weeping-waiting-and-working-with-god-in-the-pandemic>

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Transcript

[Music] Hi there, before we begin today's podcast I want to share an incredibly special resource with you today. If you're 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 premiereinsight.org/resources. I think you'll find refreshment for your soul.

So go right now to premiereinsight.org/resources and download your copy that's premiereinsight.org/resources.

[Music] The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast. Hello and welcome along to today's edition of the program. I'm Justin Briley, theology and apologetics editor for premiere and today's program brought to you as ever in partnership with SBCK and NT Wright online.

Episode 51 and we're beginning really a two-parter as we look at theological questions

around suffering today and on the next episode move on to some of the more pastoral questions involved with suffering that have come in. If you want more about the show to find out more about Tom himself, his writing and speaking and of course to find many many episodes in our archive then do go to [askNT Wright.com](http://askNTWright.com). While you're there you can register for our regular newsletter for the bonus content we provide and indeed to ask a question yourself or be entered into our regular prize draws. Again that's [askNT Wright.com](http://askNTWright.com). We are going through some challenging times here in the UK.

We've entered another strict period of lockdown. Our health services are under intense pressure at the moment. Your prayers will be valued here but it's the same situation in many countries around the world.

I hope that what Tom brings today gives some insight and consolation, whatever you're facing, wherever you're listening to today's podcast from. And again if you'd like to support the show and bring Tom's thought and theology to many more people then why not consider giving a gift to the show in 2021. If you're able to do that we'll send you as a thank you Tom's show ebook 12 answers to questions on the Bible, life and faith.

Again the link to give is at the show page [askNT Wright.com](http://askNTWright.com). For now let's get into today's programme. Welcome back to today's podcast and we've got a couple of episodes coming up the first today on the issue of suffering. We'll try and tackle some of them all past real questions next time.

And this comes through so often in different ways we've probably done two, three or four even episodes really now Tom in the podcast series that deal with issues around pain and suffering because it's just a reality isn't it in people's life and it comes in all shapes and forms. This first question that we're going to hear from Dave in Ottawa is on the subject of Alzheimer's. I don't know though if you've seen the video that was doing the rounds towards the end of the year where it's extraordinary sort of montage really of an elderly woman I think in a care home in Spain who was a former woman at Ballerina and when played Swan Lake would begin to remember the moves and physically you know sort of almost gracefully from the depths of herself somehow which obviously forgotten so much physically this was awoken and contrasted that against the fact that she was a ballerina doing that dance and very moving seems to trigger a lot of people seem to resonate with that and we've on our unbelievable blog wrote something likening it to those words of Paul on this present body and that future body we all have that there's something almost that resonates with that about that we don't really believe this is the end that somehow we will dance again.

I think it's a beautiful thing to be aware if you've seen that that video. Yes I just thought I didn't actually watch the whole thing but somebody showed me a bit of it and I thought wow and then I read in the paper or something about it as well. It's a beautiful thing a very moving thing and it resonates with what I've heard from people who've worked

closely with Alzheimer's sufferers or similar, similar sufferers, about the things that do remain and clearly music is really, really important pretty deep down as one of those things.

A dear friend whose photograph I can see as I look here was Bishop of Litchfield Keith Sutton when I was dean of Litchfield I knew him well and Keith's wife Jeanie was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's when she was in her 50s and Keith kept her at home he didn't put her in a care home he had day and night care has come in he carried on his job as a busy bishop and spent all the spare time he could with her and he said it was very moving that they would sometimes watch the television program together where people were singing hymns and even though Jeanie his wife didn't even know who he was and was completely incoherent the rest of the time and sing along with the hymns that they were still absolutely in her mind and other similar things that the music just brought out something which was still there even though you mightn't have guessed it until that happened and I think that's such a mystery we just don't know very much about it I mean Dave's question Dave from Ottawa he says something about that maybe he will one day forget the Lord but I know he won't forget me well let's read Dave's question that happens to reference it properly and it was his question that made me think of that I know absolutely here is Dave's question says I'm so blessed to be listening to the podcast over the years thank you Dave a little while ago I was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's it was not so much a surprise to me as I'm the ninth member on my mother's side to be diagnosed I know I will someday forget the Lord but I know he will never forget me what would you like to say to the many people in the world with this particular disability which some have said to be in many ways a theological disease yeah I'd not heard that phrase of theological disease before but I assume that it means that it raises the theological question that if somebody is no longer able to function mentally and with their mind and emotions working together has something happened to them as a human being I think I want to say yes something has happened to them as a human being but I don't think it's a complete denial I mean there are so many things that happen to us as human beings which seem a denial of the person that we once were when we were in our twenties or 30s or whatever it might be and yet in other respects maybe we are meant to be more more image bearing more capable of bearing God's image than we were before I don't know I think what I want to say here is that we don't know whether Dave whether you and others like you will forget the Lord just like we can't tell whether that ballerina had actually forgotten the moves until they played the music and hear her body remembered and likewise my friends severely stricken wife who could remember all the words to the hymns because the music just carried those memories and I've known other elderly people whose minds were in other respects failing who could still recite the poems that they'd learnt when they were seven or eight or nine at school and so on so it's a mystery and I'm also struck by an elderly priest I remember hearing about from a friend of his who was beginning to find that in the same way his mind was going and his response was that for many years he had prayed to the

Lord take my life take my heart take my mind and he said if now he wants to take my mind then that's up to him and there's a sense of an appropriate resignation rather than Dylan Thomas is raging against the dying of the light and so on but there is also of course the sure and certain hope of the resurrection from the dead yes of course we our bodies will crumble and decay our minds will crumble and decay sometimes the one happens in advance of the other but the whole Christian hope is not based on let's hope we can make it to 80 or 85 or 90 while we still got all our faculties wouldn't that be nice perhaps but rather that God has a new body a new mind a risen self ready for us so that in the new creation that's who we will be and that's what we have to work towards all the time even though that's really really tough and my heart goes out today because knowing enough already to know what it's likely going to be like must be very seriously worrying it's like sort of facing a slow moving car crash and not being able to do anything about it and so I shall pray for David and others like him and I think that equally there's that sense isn't there for those who care for relatives with dementia Alzheimer's and so on to some extent you know you lose the person to some extent but there's still remnants there of that person's personality and memory and everything else and it is just a very confusing difficult time it's a very gray area of humanity isn't it at that point absolutely and I think yes that calls for resources and reserves of emotional ability to give and give and give and again another reference the Irish poet Michal O'Sheel when his late wife breed was dying started off with Parkinson's but then it went into some form of dementia and Michal wrote that amazing book of poems which he'd had as a sort of a diary of watching over her until she was no longer able to be at home and was in a care home around the corner I think it's called One Crimson Thread and you just feel I didn't know I was going to be called upon to love and love and love to love this person who doesn't even seem to know me anymore but that seems to be what we are called to do and that's tough and yeah maybe many of us have got to think about that sort of thing in advance because we may well be called upon to do it and those who do like my friend Keith Sutton and like Michal are a shiny example to the rest of us that's what your marriage vows actually meant a better offer worse for Richard for poor insignis and in elf to love and to cherish till death to us part and I don't mean to be judgmental in any way to those who perhaps do go in this direction but I think there's a sadness I find in the fact that this the reality of this is an increasing reality among the elderly population has led to people choosing to end their lives and choosing to go down the route of euthanasia and so on because somehow they say well I wouldn't be me anymore but for me that's that is something sad because it almost it means that if I cannot be this then it is not worth living anymore and for me that almost idolatise is that aspect of who you are that if I cannot be this if I cannot be in command in this way any longer I don't want this life and quite I think I share exactly what you said that I don't want to be judgmental and say oh how silly you should never be like that because I haven't faced that at the same time I would very firmly adhere to the long term Jewish and Christian teaching which is that life is a gift from God and it's God's business what he does with it and when and so on of course the fact that we've now got much superior medical science than we had two or

three hundred years ago means that people are living longer and this is more of a problem for more people more of the time than it used to be people who would have died quite young in days gone by simply are living longer and facing these problems but I think partly just something I'm with you on this is a very deep reaction against but also when you start to think of the effects on the rest of the family that you know the children and grandchildren saying well of course granny decided dot dot dot and I think the long term effects of potential guilt there should they have been glad should they not have been glad it gets us into some very murky areas and I don't think we ought to go there the Ask Anti-Write Anything podcast is brought to you by Premier in partnership with SBCK and Anti-Write Online and Anti-Write Online are offering a new free ebook from Tom from hypocrisy to compromise to faithfulness it's the story of Acts 15 and explores how the early church transitioned from a predominantly Jewish messianic movement into something new that the world had never seen learn the story behind this pivotal moment in church history with this new free ebook from Tom Wright get it now at anti-write online dot org slash ask anti-write that anti-write online dot org forward slash ask anti-write let's get another sort of theological question in here Lana in California asks is suffering and pain a natural consequence of sin like stepping out of a safe terrain into a dangerous terrain or is God actively inflicting the pain obviously I'm much more comfortable thinking of it as the former but reading passages like Genesis 3 in which God tells Eve I will make your pains in childbearing very severe leave me grappling and anxious about the character of God would love to hear your thoughts on this hmm yeah I mean there are many things in scripture where words are put into God's mouth which do seem almost to anthropomorphize this is what I'm going to do etc etc and when we stand back we say well God made this world in a mysterious and beautiful way but it was a world which had many things in it which he then wanted his human creatures to take forward as a project rather than having it simply as a tableau and that there are times like that when I would much more be inclined to say what Lana says about like stepping out of a safe terrain on today into dangerous terrain that well you have gone to this place and God is not going to say oh well we'll stop creation working at that point in order to make it less painful for you or something like if I drive round a sharp bend at 90 miles an hour I can't expect God to say oh well we'll just stop the laws of physics for a moment to stop you getting into trouble there it's going to be more complicated than that but I think I would want to go some way down that line because the character of God as we know in scripture can't be just read off one sentence or another here or there and particularly in the Old Testament so many things about God are part of different trajectories different perceptions which ultimately meet in the person of Jesus and I argued this in my little book on the pandemic that we see on the one hand God saying if you do this and this and this I will punish you for that and on the other hand people like Job suffering terrible things and people saying oh God's punishing you and it's quite clear from the way the book is set up that's not the case at all how do those two go together the answer is they only go together when we see them meeting in the cross of Jesus where God is punishing sin but where it is also an innocent sufferer saying my God why

did you abandon me and so many of these things what is God doing in the world the first and last Christian answer should be God is being Jesus in the world now let's work it out around that and that doesn't mean oh well that's all right then there won't ever be any pain no far from it Jesus said take up the cross and follow me we live in a dangerous and painful world and God has come into our midst not to magically take the pain away but to share and bear the pain of the world and to ask us to join him in that pilgrimage towards the new creation which will involve us as well in suffering not because God wants to make life nasty for us but because the world as it has become a nasty place and if we're Jesus people we are to be part of those who share that pain so that the world may be redeemed and that is written right across the New Testament whether it's in Mark or in Romans or first Peter or Revelation that that is how it seemed people have read the book God and the pandemic but of course you sort of very briefly spelled out some of your thoughts quite early on in the pandemic in an article for Time magazine that was shared quite widely and did generate quite a bit of controversy as well as people read that you can't say everything he necessary want to say in the word limit that you're given there but Joshua Hamilton in Pennsylvania says I appreciated your article in Time magazine about God lamenting with us through this time of pandemic of course it was met with criticism specifically that it presented God as possible rather than impossible I didn't not get that take rather that you were demonstrating that God despite his impossibility can and does enter into our grief with the intention of redeeming these moments and reconciling people to himself through them so I wonder if you could present your views on God's impossibility and help explain that article in light of those views and he very much looks forward to addressing that so perhaps just to define these terms for those who are maybe scratching their heads or haven't read that Time magazine article what do we mean by God being passable versus impossible? Yes passability comes from the Latin Passio which is about suffering and there's a technical problem here because suffering can be seen in terms of this is very painful or it can be seen in the more technical sense of something being done to me as opposed to me doing something so I am suffering the effects of this light even though it's not causing me pain I am the passive partner when it comes to me and this light shining on me or whatever so I think part of the problem in the early church was with people who believed that if God is God in any meaningful sense God must always be the active one always be the one who is giving out who is pouring out of himself etc and the idea that God could be passive whether in that general sense or less alone in the sense of actually suffering would seem like a contradiction in terms now into that question of a classical view of a God who couldn't possibly be other than the initiator the actor the one who initiates everything into that there comes the figure of Jesus and the Jesus who weeps in get semi the Jesus who in John 11 weeps at the tomb of his friend the Jesus who dies on the cross and in Matthew and Mark shouts out my God why did you abandon me quote from Psalm 22 how do you do Christology and an impassable God and this has been a huge topic of theological conversation over the last generation particularly associated with Jurgen Moltzmann the great German scholar who is astonishingly still alive and lecturing in his

mid 90s now my son and I went to see him in Westminster Abbey not that long ago bless him and many people have found particularly after the experience of all the suffering of the 20th century and two world wars and Moltzmann was a prisoner of war in the Second World War etc that the idea of an impassable God somehow away from the process beckoning us to come and join him in his impassibility or whatever just doesn't cut it that just doesn't do what the Christian gospel ought to do whereas the idea of a God who in the person of Jesus says I am with you in trouble I am taking it upon myself and I'm going to bring you through this that actually sounds more like the gospel as we read it in Matthew Mark Luke and John and Paul so then you've got the question of a kind of a classical theology which says you can't have a God who suffers versus a Trinitarian classical Christmas theology which says that there is one God and only one God and Jesus himself is the second person of the Trinity the Holy Spirit is the third person in that Trinity which sends us to passages like and this is where I was working from like Romans 8 where in Romans 8 the whole creation is groaning in travail fine we know that we know about earthquakes we know about wars and pandemics and so on that's always gone on this should not be a surprise where should we be in that and it isn't the case that the church should be above it and should be looking down from a great height saying well we're all right because we know God so we're not involved in that no the church is right in the middle of it as historically has always been the case the church pastorally and practically involved we ourselves Paul says who have the first fruits of the spirit we grown within ourselves as we await our adoption as children the redemption of our bodies but then where is God and the answer is God the spirit is groaning within us with inarticulate groanings verse 26 and so if you have any Trinitarian theology at all and Paul obviously does in Romans 8 you have to say God the spirit is groaning inarticulately within us within the pain of the world and then verse 27 the one who searches the hearts that is God the Father knows what is the mind of the spirit because the spirit and proceeds for God's people according to God's will that is an extraordinary picture of the unity of God holding together the pain of the world and the pain of the church as well and then Paul says this shapes us according to the pattern of Christ that he might be the first born in a large family in other words in the mystery of the Trinity you can talk about the ultimate sovereignty and impassibility of God if you want but you must never break the link between the Father and the Spirit shaping us according to the pattern of the Son the Son who cried out my God why did you abandon me now I haven't answered the question what I've done is to put it back into its biblical context and suggest that urgently that's what we should do and especially with John's gospel as well in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God and the word was laid at the tomb of his friend in Bethany in John 11 Jesus didn't do the weeping insofar as he was human John would say he did the weeping insofar as he was God and I would say just go figure take it from there and let's rethink and re-pray our vision of God accordingly Wow well I can recommend highly because it helped me to think through this issue when you had a great conversation with Miras Love Volf on his podcast for the life of the world and that will be in the archive I'll try and make sure to link to it from today's

show you had a really great conversation with him about you the book God and the pandemic but it was in light of that time article as well for which you'd come under some criticism but yes lament that that was really helpful final question then just for today's episode and this sort of encapsulates some of this stuff we've already been talking about but again Melissa again out in California says that I had a health problem for many years and I believe God had compassion for the pain I was experiencing now I understand suffering to be an unavoidable aspect of life but he did heal me through diagnosis and treatment and I consider this a gift from God Now while I understand the danger to view a relationship with Jesus transactionally I also see a tendency to glorify suffering which feels damaging to those actually suffering doesn't new creation mean poverty and pain are diminished which would then suggest that it is ultimately God's will there is health and wealth as crude as that may sound for all people could you speak into this so yes I suppose Melissa doesn't want us to lose the fact that she did please God does do good things for people that healing happens even prosperity sometimes you know whatever and and that we shouldn't wallow necessarily in a view that suffering is our lot and we just have to bear it as best we can and see God's purposes through it somehow Yes at so many points it's vital to keep a balance in all of this isn't it and Melissa I'm totally with you I do believe God answers prayers for healings sometimes through the skilled attention of the medical professionals and sometimes despite the fact that they say there's nothing more we can do and I know people who are alive today having been given up by the doctors as being completely hopeless and about to die and people are praying and that person is still alive equally I said in a sermon recently I had two friends who are both diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in the summer of 2015 both of them were part of church fellowships that were praying for them both of them had expert medical care one of them was dead within six months and the other one was amazingly healed and is alive today and in fact I'm going to be I hope talking to him on the phone in the next day or two I don't understand why that happens I do not have a theory to explain it I merely see in the Bible and in real life that God can and does heal people some of the time for purposes best known to himself and other times this just doesn't happen My parade example is Acts 12 where at the beginning of Acts 12 Herod has James the brother of John killed with the sword and he's going to do the same to Peter but the church is praying and Peter gets out of jail free and continues to have a career as a traveling missionary and yes he dies a pretty nasty death at the end according to legend but so what was going on there if I was James's mother I wouldn't like Acts 12 I would say well we were praying for James as well why didn't God rescue him and that is part of the mystery and it's because of that that there is simultaneously in the church this sense that yes suffering happens it will happen to all of us in one form or another emotional physical mental spiritual political social whatever suffering is going to happen but we don't wallow in it we lament which is a way of saying we don't understand what's going on it doesn't mean we've got the solution but then the lament will sometimes perhaps quite often lead to a prayer for God to rescue us from that moment and to restore us to health and or wealth as it may be although that tends to be a kind of a lure

and I think Melissa is aware of that phrase health and wealth being a bit of a carrot that's dangled in front of us as though we were to strain forward for that forgetting that for most of the world's history and for most Christians throughout history health has been sporadic and brief the death rate has been in people's 20s and 30s usually at the most and wealth has been very limited to put it mildly for most of history and to this day only a few people in the world are seriously wealthy and so on and so on so it's it is always a balance but at the same time I don't want our symptoms sink back and say oh well we're all going to suffer so what because the Kingdom of God is about God being with us in that in order to bring signs of new creation and it's that business of the signposts of new creation that I think we ought to be emphasizing more and more and the answering of prayer for healing would certainly be among those signposts even if that doesn't happen as often as we might like but there are many other prayers as well which when God answers them this is a sign that ever since the resurrection of Jesus new creation has been pushing up green shoots and one day that new creation will happen and our task is to be signpost makers for that future even if in the nature of the case that is going to be painful in some ways in ways that we don't expect and we certainly won't like so we rejoice with you Melissa in your healing and we pray that we'll be a signpost for others towards that ultimate healing and reconciliation with God but thank you so much for all the questions we've got questions of a pastoral nature but in a similar area around issues of suffering and so on that we'll do on the next podcast but for now Tom thank you very much again thank you good to be with you again listening to today's show come back next week when we're going to be doing part two pastoral questions on suffering covering issues like grief mental health and someone who says I just wish I didn't exist Tom will be tackling those on the next edition of the program if you'd like more from the show do go to our web page ask nt write com where you can register for the newsletter and to ask a question yourself and indeed you're able to give towards the show as well as a thank you will send you Tom's ebook 12 answers to questions on the Bible life and faith for now thanks for being with us and we'll see you next time you've been listening to the ask nt write anything podcast let other people know about this show by rating and reviewing it in your podcast provider for more podcast from premier visit premier.org.uk/podcasts