

OpenTheo

#158 Why don't I hear from God any more?

February 23, 2023



Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

CORRECTED AUDIO UPLOADED!

Tom and Justin are back with a fresh batch of questions from listeners who are having trouble hearing from God. Nicole asks why 'Ask and you shall receive' doesn't seem to work in practise? Shelagh says she doesn't hear from God the way she used to - is it because of disobedience? Robert asks how you can tell if you have misheard from God? Tom also gives an update on his health and work and reflects on how he hears from God.

- Subscribe to the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast: <https://pod.link/1441656192>
- More shows, free eBook, newsletter, and sign up to ask Tom your questions: <https://premierunbelievable.com>
- For live events: <http://www.unbelievable.live>
- For online learning: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/training>
- Support us in the USA: <http://www.premierinsight.org/unbelievableshow>
- Support us in the rest of the world: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/donate>

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 NTY Anything podcast.

[Music] Hello there.

Welcome back to the show that brings you the thought and theology of NTY. I'm Justin Briley, head of theology and apologetics for premiere unbelievable. And today Tom and I are back with a fresh batch of questions from listeners.

But they're having trouble hearing from God. Nicole asks, "Why ask and you shall receive?" doesn't seem to work in practice. Sheila says she doesn't hear from God the way she used to.

Is it because of disobedience? And Robert asks, "How you can tell if you've misheard from God?" Tom also gives an update on his health, his work, and reflects on how he hears from God too. Thanks by the way to Jagger, who left a review of the podcast saying, "Absolutely fabulous podcast." That explores the vast knowledge of the New Testament and early Christianity that NTY right possesses. Thank you Jagger.

Do leave a review yourself if you can, wherever you get your podcast from. It helps others to discover us. And if you like this show, we think you'll like our other podcasts too from premiere unbelievable.

In fact, this week's unbelievable show will be reflecting on some big events in the Christian world, the Asbury Revival. Somewhere Tom has actually only fairly recently spoken. Well, you can catch that on this weekend's edition of the Unbelievable Show on podcast.

Again, if you want more from our show's articles, resources, premiereunbelievable.com is the place to go. For now, enjoy today's programme. Welcome back to today's show.

And it's lovely to be sitting down with Tom again after actually a little while because due to health issues and other things intervening, Tom, it's been a little while since we've been able to record some fresh episodes answering some questions. Tell us a little bit about what life's been like for you over the last couple of months. It's been a bit strange.

I feel as though last autumn really from more of October through till the New Year really was just a bit of a blank. I did some things. I was able to crank myself up and I went to Kentucky in lecture at Asbury Seminary.

I think that the travel particularly really took it out to me, but I knew I needed to do those lectures as it were. But apart from that, I've been trying to lie low. It's been one or two local engagements I've been able to do.

And then gradually after New Year, I started to get a bit more energy. But the rheumatoid arthritis was diagnosed a month ago in my hands, knees, ankles. And so I've been on medication for that.

And also trying to change my diet in accordance with what a nutritionist have been advising. And I've been having some acupuncture treatment. And it's basically, I'm trying as many things as I can to see if any of it works.

And at the same time, several kind, faithful wise friends have been praying for me, sometimes by arrangement, sometimes spontaneously in the middle of doing something else at Tom, let me pray for your hands or wrists, whatever. Which is great. And I am delighted that that's happening and will continue.

But I mean, I measure this by things like how easy it is to go up and down stairs. And today it's a bit easier than sometimes. Sometimes I can only go one step at a time and then bring the other foot up or down.

This morning, I was able just about to manage getting up and down the stairs one stair at a time in the proper way. And those sort of things which make me realize I'm still quite a long way from anything like normality. But fortunately, I can still type, I can still write, I can still edit stuff on the screen.

So I'm able to get on with some of the regular work, which I simply wasn't able to do between September and Christmas. So that has been a real relief. And thank you to everyone who has been.

I see you wearing some gloves at those to help. Maggie found these Maggie found these little gray gloves online. They're made of bamboo curiously.

And they are for arthritis sufferers and they kind of keep the hands and joints in the hand warm and and supple. And so I wear them most of the time. And if I take them off, I do feel the lack of.

So it's one of those odd things. I'm in uncharted territory as far as I'm concerned. My GP is sending me to a specialist, a rheumatoid specialist, in the hopes that there may be something else which they may find, which they may then be able to treat, to speed up the process of insuffires you recover, you don't recover from rheumatoid arthritis, apparently it's a lifelong condition.

But you can ameliorate its effects. And that's obviously what we're trying to do. Yes.

Well, I'm sure there'll be lots of people adding their prayers to those who are already praying for you, Tom. I can imagine that the main thing is obviously the frustration of your use to doing so much, buzzing around, doing lectures here, writing books there. And that's all had to obviously go at a bit of a slower pace over the last few months,

hasn't it? It's been much, much slower.

I having not really gone into a cliff hall where I'm based hardly at all in the autumn, except I did a couple of lectures right at the beginning and then to right at the very end for special reasons. And I was able just to go in and sit there on a stool because standing up is difficult and do them and then go home and lie down again. But this term I was determined I was going to do my regular stint, which is a Monday morning Bible exposition.

And so this term I'm doing acts. I'm halfway through the exposition of acts. And I'm thoroughly enjoying it.

And it's something which is just sort of eager to get to grips with the issues and to help the students see a bigger picture of acts than they probably seen before. Well, look, as I say, I'm sure many people will be thinking and praying for you as you deal with that. And I just hope that you know, you can do what you can do and know more, you know, that's the thing.

Well, look, we've got some great questions here. In fact, speaking of prayer, that'll be coming up in a future episode soon. But we've put together a few questions from people on the subject of hiddenness, God not speaking, that sort of thing.

So why don't we leap straight in to some of these, Tom? Nicole from Ontario is asking, why do sincere seekers seem to still not find God? Here's her question. Simply put, verses like, ask and you shall receive trouble me. There are many who, despite desperate and genuine prayers, do not receive what they cry out for.

Frankly, I can't stomach the idea that these people simply lacked faith. Can you help me make sense of ask and you shall receive? It is simply not my experience that it's true. Thanks for your time and all the good you do.

That's Nicole's question, Tom. Yeah, well, thank you, Nicole. I get that.

And as a pastor, I have met this at various times. I remember once a young student coming to see Maggie and me, it was a girl student and Maggie and I saw her together. I think we saw two or three times.

She was in exactly this position. A lot of her friends were Christians. They had prayed.

Jesus seemed to come into their life and they were all happy about it and eager. And she wanted to share what they had. And it took us a while.

And I'm still not sure that we ended up ultimately helping her forward. But what we did on Earth by very cautious, careful questioning, as you have to do, pastrally, was some real blocks in her own life, particularly a very serious breakdown in relationship with her

own parents, where she had just was blanking them out. And her whole emotional life seemed to be, I'm not in touch with all that.

I'm just trying to be my own person here. And we came to the conclusion, we prayed about this with her, that maybe the facility inside oneself, I mean, is a very metaphorical language, with which one can receive the love of God, God as father, not least, is very closely tied to the emotions that we have about other human relationships, not least parents or indeed siblings or whoever. And it's rather like Jesus talking about unless you forgive, you won't be forgiven, that you know, there is, it's as though there's a door which we open to let our forgiveness out.

And that's the same door through which God's forgiveness comes in. Now, so I would say, and I've said it many times on this podcast, I know, that somebody who is facing this really does need to find a wise pastor or perhaps a psychotherapist who can work with them. The other thing to say is we are all different.

Some people react to all sorts of things with open, warm emotion and seem to be very engaged with other people or with music or with the scenery or whatever it is, while other people are much more restrained and quiet and there's something which doesn't work the same way with them. And there's nothing wrong with that. It's just we are different.

So I think particularly if somebody has been rather sort of bombarded by sermons saying, you know, name it and claim it or ask God for whatever you want, and it'll happen. And then that they try and it doesn't work. Well, you know, that is that is universal Christian experience, I suspect.

And I think sometimes when people are first new in the faith, sometimes God graciously allows them to pray prayers, which are actually easy for him to fulfill. But if they then decide they're going to pray for something quite different, which is quite other, there may be quite a lot of wrestling before their will and God's will somehow come into alignment. We'll be talking about this in relation to another question, I think, in a moment.

And in my own experience and that of people that I've been able to be with pastorally, I think often God allows us to pray for X, because he really wants us wants to give us Y. But at the moment, X is all we're able to see. And I think God happily takes our prayers for X. And as it were, uses them towards the greater good of why. And when we get why, we say, Oh, my goodness, thank God, he didn't give me X, because that would have gotten away of this much greater thing.

Now, it's easy to say, I've had a few personal examples of that over the last 50 years, but it's not always everybody's experience. So it remains a mystery. We never get to the point where we're just sticking a coin into a machine and getting something out the

bottom as a sort of automatic thing.

And there's always a danger that Christians out of the desire to be faithful and to take the Bible seriously, saying ask for anything, etc. Do make that mistake. So I very much hear what's being said, but ultimately, I think the local pastoral and psychotherapeutic help is probably what's needed.

Hi there. Before we go any further, I want you to know about a very special ebook we're releasing this month called Critical Race Theory and Christianity. This ebook draws from two unbelievable podcasts with Neil Shenvie, Rasselberry, Owen Strand and Jermaine Marshall, addressing questions like, has so-called woke ideology taken over parts of the church, or is white privilege a problem in the church, and is Critical Race Theory compatible with the gospel.

I'd love for you to have a copy of this powerful ebook as my special thanks to you for your gift to Premier Insight today, the ministry that brings you this podcast each week. You see, all of the conversations, insight, resources and encouragement that you get from Premier Insight programs like this one are only possible because of the support of wonderful friends like you. Without your generosity, none of this would be possible.

So please, go to premierinsight.org/give and make a donation today. That's premierinsight.org/give. And don't forget to download our newest ebook, Critical Race Theory and Christianity as my special thank you. A pastoral question in a sense as well from Sheila Insare, who says, "When I first made a commitment to Christ some 40 years ago, I heard him speaking to me a lot.

Why don't I now?" People have suggested that it's because I'm more mature and don't need that so much now. But might it be because I'm being disobedient or missing his way? Yeah, I read that with a great feeling of sympathy and I want to say to Sheila, yeah, it might actually be that. Certainly, disobedience and charging off in your own way, having been told to go a different way.

That would do it, but there are many other things. And I think the maturity thing is important. When young children are talking with their parents, sometimes the parents use baby language and have all sorts of verbal games that they will play, it will be very odd if when the child was a teenager, let alone an adult, if the parents carried on talking to them in that way.

We would think there's something actually wrong with that. And I think sometimes, and the great writers on prayer, the great mystics from days gone by have said this again and again. It's as though God withdraws in order to say by implication, "Please come looking for me a bit further." That lovely verse in the Psalms, which says, "My heart has talked of you, seek ye my face.

Thy face, Lord, will I seek." So it's not that God is there on tap. There is a seeking and some of the prophets are very strong on this. The wait for the Lord, and Isaiah 40, those who wait for the Lord, and that waiting is like somebody who's come to see somebody else and is knocked on the door and suspects that they're in but is waiting for the response.

And sometimes you have to wait a long time. And I often remind myself and remind others that the Judeans, after the Babylonian captivity, had been told that one day God would come back and liberate them. And 400 and some years went by before finally a young man turned up on the banks of the Jordan.

And John the Baptist said, "He's the one." And didn't look like what they'd expected. But I think of those faithful people like Simeon and Anna in the temple, faithful people in every generation who are praying, Lord, do it. You've said you'll come back and rescue us.

Now please do it. And in many periods, there were sort of full storms like the Maccabean crisis, etc. And people would have thought, this is the moment.

This is what we've been praying for. But then, oh no, it all went horribly wrong. But eventually, and I think often that's how it is that we have to go on praying and praying and waiting for the thing which God really does want to give us.

And so I think there is the question of maturity and part of maturity is, human maturity is delayed gratification. And maybe there's an element of that in our praying as well. But it does remain a mystery.

And I think the idea as well of Jesus speaking to us, that's really important. And some people, some of the time, find that a regular thing, discussing Christian experience with people. A lot of Christians will have known a bit of that, but then they're kind of left to get on with it for a bit.

I think of Paul and Silas after they'd scooped up Timothy, they're on their missionary journey. This is the beginning of Acts 16. And they try to go into Bithynia.

And they try to do this and try to end the spirit forbids them to preach the word in Asia, which is Western Turkey. And I think there's some weeks go by maybe even months where they're no doubt saying their prayers day by day, they have no idea what's supposed to be going on. Finally, Paul has a vision from somebody from Macedonia saying, come over and help us.

Oh, now we know why didn't somebody say that before? They had for some reason God made them wait. So that's quite a common thing. The other thing that strikes me is that sometimes people can have a false expectation of how God will speak to them, that it has to be the same way this other person experiences it.

You know, this other person has rapturous sort of experiences all the time. And it feels like God is telling them what to have for breakfast and everything else. Whereas I am aware that other people are simply wired differently.

And if that's the expectation that's perhaps being implanted from someone else or from the minister at the church or whatever. In fact, I know many people who actually the way they experience God is actually through reading, through feeling in, you know, a real connection with a wonderful theological argument. And that's just the way that God speaks to them.

So it's not always going to be the same from one individual to another. Yes, yes. So since he says something about that, he has a lovely phrase.

I can't remember which book of his it comes in. He says that there are some people for whom a manual of devotion will leave them cold. But then he says, they will find that the heart sings unbidden when they're working their way through a difficult piece of theology with with pipe in teeth.

I think he says with pencil in hand. In other words, when you're really grappling with something, then a sense of the mystery of God and the presence of God can come over you. Now, other people reading the same book might not feel that at all.

But I think particularly, of course, scripture and the constant reading of scripture and the attention, the expectation that God will speak somehow through our reading of scripture, maybe directly, maybe with just an enlarged sense of God's purposes and God's world, and then a sense of, I am at home in this world. Now, let me be faithful today. That's often how it happens.

Yeah, I hope that's been helpful in some way, Sheila. Thank you for sending in your question. Here's another one.

This is from Robert in the United States who says, what should be our reaction when we miss here God in prayer? A few years ago, I thought I heard God telling me to do something in prayer. But when I went to take action on this, I found that all closed and it doesn't seem likely it'll ever be open in the future. I don't normally hear things this directly in prayer and try to confirm it with a week of prayer and fasting.

Furthermore, for as common an experience as this seems to be in Christian life, there seem to be no biblical examples to follow. The Bible only ever seems to speak about people who actually heard God, never anyone who thought they did, but were mistaken. Any thoughts on that, Tom? Yeah, my thought went straight to the prophet Jeremiah, who thought he had a word from the Lord and prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem and then waited a long time, a very long time, with it not happening and people mocking him for being a false prophet and so on.

And he says at one point in agony, "Lord, you have deceived me and I was deceived." Now, of course, eventually Jerusalem did fall, but he goes through that long anguish. And this relates to something I said before that sometimes when we pray specifically about one thing, I think God can and does take those prayers and use them in a different way. And we have to be open to that and be ready for it.

And I think the idea of spending a week of prayer and fasting, to be sure that you've heard something, that's great, but it doesn't mean still that you've heard the actual right word. It just means that you are being humble and open in the presence of God and not as we were trying to twist God's arm on this particular thing. But to say, quite frankly, "Hey, I thought we were going on this track and why doesn't anything seem to be happening?" Seems to me that's a perfectly okay place to be and again and again and again, Christians, when they're in that place, will find a day, a week, a year, five years later, that actually things have moved in a different way and that God has brought them now to a place which is the deeper reality for which they were longing, which they just hadn't seen.

I mean, another bit of an example. The reason Paul wrote Romans, he tells us this, is that he wanted to go to Spain and is introducing himself to the church in Rome so that he could get through them to Spain because that's his missionary goal. "I'm going to Spain, so I need you guys to be on board and here's this letter." We don't know whether Paul got to Spain or not.

I think God allowed Paul to dream of going to Spain and to pray for it and plan for it in order to get him to write Romans because Romans is a huge intellectual cultural effort. It's an extraordinary document and he must have realized he needed to lay all that stuff out and in a sense then it doesn't matter if he got to Spain or not because he did en route the thing which in fact has been explosive for the last 2000 years. Whenever Christians have seriously studied Romans, all sorts of things have changed as a result.

So I think in little ways as well in our lives, we really do think, God is calling me to do this and so I must plan and do this and this and this and sometimes those intermediate things may actually be far more important for the kingdom of God than the big thing that we thought. So this teaches us humility the whole time. Humility and hope, it's a great combination but neither comes easy.

Just as we finish, Tom, I just wondered from your experience, how do you sense God speaking to you? Is it a direct voice? Is it just a prompting? Is it often through something coming to mind through Scripture or in some other way? Often the daily and regular reading of Scripture forms a context within which things will bubble up, within which I will have a sort of sigh of relief, a sense of okay the jigs are always coming together at this point. There have been times in my life when I have heard, it's hard to say whether they've been actual voices allowed or just a very definite word, either a word of warning

or a word of this is the way, get on and walk in it if I was tempted to be slack and worry about whether this was the right way or not. And also when you pray for something and when you put yourself out there and when you do the fasting and prayer and regular and claiming of promises, if you ask anything in my name I will do it, when you do that and then quite suddenly an unexpected door opens, oh my goodness thank you, this is clearly something we need to follow up and I've had many many examples of that.

And I think then as well, I remember a wise old friend, a man who was a friend of my parents in the church where I grew up, who was a humble wise Christian, very mature in his faith. And he said to me once, just almost quite casually, he said when I go to a communion service, they read the passage from the gospel in the ordinary course of the liturgy then they say I go up and I receive communion, then I come back to my seat and I go back to the gospel that we had read, the passage from the four gospels which we had read, and he said, and then I pay attention and at that moment I will find that God is with me and speaking through that gospel. And these little disciplines are ways of putting ourselves within hearing distance as it were, and that would be different for different people, but I think part of Christian maturity is finding out what seems to work for me.

And when it happens there's not much room for doubt actually, you think, okay right, I was expecting something, this wasn't necessarily what I wanted to hear, but this seems to be what's coming through. Sometimes it's the voice of conscience. Just something you're planning to do which over a day or a week or something, gradually you realize this is not something I ought to be getting into, and we have to pull back from whatever it was, and God speaks through that as much as anything.

Thank you so much, Thomas. It's such helpful thoughts and I hope that's been helpful for Robert and Sheila and Nicole who sent in those questions. And thank you for sharing a bit of your own experience.

We'll be back again same time next week with questions on prayer, which is obviously very much related to the questions we've been hearing today, but for now Tom, thank you so much. Thank you. Well thank you for being with us on today's show, and if you want to ask a question do get in touch by registering at premierunbelievable.com. If you can support us in bringing thinking faith to others through shows like this, you can also give at the website.

It does cost us of course to put on conferences to produce podcasts to create videos to write articles, host websites, pay staff, but most importantly it's about reaching people through all of those means. So if you'd like to stand with us and donate you can do it at premierunbelievable.com or there's a giving link with today's show. Next time we'll be asking what difference does prayer make and Tom will be sharing his prayer habits.

Until then God bless and see you next time. [Pause]