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#38 Lockdown livestream - Tom answers questions on Facebook Live

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom Wright talks about his new book 'God and the Pandemic' and takes a variety of live listener questions in this livestream edition of the show. Justin and Lucy Brierley ask Tom questions on racism, other religions, the problem of suffering, heaven and the Gospels, all submitted during the show via Facebook live.

- For God and the Pandemic: <https://spckpublishing.co.uk/god-and-the-pandemic>
- For the NT Wright Online e-book 'The Story of Acts 15': <http://www.ntwrightonline.org/askntwright>
- Support the show and receive NT Wright's brand new E-book '12 Answers to questions about the Bible, Life and Faith' <https://resources.premier.org.uk/supportntwright/>
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Transcript

[MUSIC] The Ask, NT. Write anything podcast.

[MUSIC] Well, hello there, and welcome to a very special edition of the Ask, NT.

Write, Anything Show, and Tom's just sending himself live as well here. We're really glad that you've joined us here on Facebook. Very first time we've tried something like this from the show.

I'm all a bit of a jitter because I'm wondering, will the technology work as far as I know it all is? So welcome along to this very special live event. I'm Justin Bradley, theology and apologetics editor for Premiere, and host of the Fortnitely podcast in which Tom Wright

answers your questions. My co-host for today, help me to put your questions to Tom, is my wife, the Reverend Lucy Briley, who's the minister of Woking United Reform Church here in Surrey, where we live.

Now, we are broadcasting from our house, and Tom joins us from lockdown at his home in Oxford. Tom is, of course, the former bishop of Durham. He's held numerous academic positions, most recently taking up the position of Senior Research Fellow at Whitcliffe Hall, Oxford.

He's written many, many books. The most recent of which is God and the pandemic. His response to what this present global crisis means for the world and the church.

So Tom, welcome along to the programme. Thank you very much. It's very good to be with you.

And yeah, I'm just getting a little bit used to broadcasting, as it were, from my own study. It felt very strange to begin with, but I've done it a few times in the last few weeks. That's just one of the old things we've had to learn in lockdown, I guess.

Absolutely. I'm going to ask you a bit more about your lockdown experience in a moment. But before we do that, I just want to make sure that if you enjoy what you're going to be watching and hearing tonight, that you'll make sure that you're subscribed to our Fortnite podcast.

I get to sit down with Tom on a regular basis and ask him all kinds of interesting questions. And you don't need to miss an episode if you subscribe to the podcast over at askentwright.com. It's brought to you in partnership with SBCK, Tom's UK publisher, and also NT-Rite Online, who produced Tom's online video courses too. And I'm going to let you in on a little special offer.

They're doing a little later on in the programme too. As well as staying up here on Facebook, tonight's live stream, will of course be available very soon on the podcast as well. And while you're at that podcast page, why not subscribe to the newsletter as well? That keeps you in touch with the show.

All of our extra content, again, it's askentwright.com. And there's a link in the description of this Facebook post where you can click through and find out more. So we're broadcasting across a number of Facebook channels tonight. But whichever one you're watching through, we'll be taking as many questions as we can.

It's very simple to submit a question. All you do is ask it in the comments underneath this live video. And we've got someone collating those and sending it through to Lucy and myself.

In fact, thumbs up and a shout out for Peter Barham, who's doing a magnificent job

already collating those. And we'll try to ask as many as we can of Tom, who's very bravely going to be taking these without any notice whatsoever of what may be coming his way. And if you like someone else's question as well, obviously do feel free to give that a like to and bring it to our attention.

So we're going to be talking through some of the issues. And Lucy's going to be helping with bringing up some of the questions and putting her own thoughts into this as well. So yes, we last spoke, I think, near the beginning of lockdown, Tom, didn't we? And obviously that was a bit of a novelty for all of us.

10 or 11 weeks in, the novelty has definitely worn off. So how are you and Maggie holding up at the moment? Well, it comes and goes. And it was a great relief just a few days ago, when the government seemed to be relaxing some of the restrictions to the point where we felt justified in welcoming our youngest son and his family with two little people into our back garden.

We kept our distance. They sat over there. We sat over here and we were able to have coffee and that sort of thing.

And then we did the same at their house. And again, we stayed in the garden and we kept our distance. But it was a huge sigh of relief.

And one of the things we've learned is that FaceTime is great fun, but it's not the same thing as actually being with people. And of course, all the technology is wonderful and has helped in many, many ways. And we still haven't been able to go and see the other bits of our family, one up North Endorum, one in Bristol, one in Litchfield.

But we obviously we talk to them on FaceTime or the phone all the time. But that's a real deprivation. And there's just no way around that.

And I know we're doing reasonably all right. We can get grocery deliveries. I nip out and grab a newspaper, keeping my social distance, etc, etc.

And I can top up with one or two things like bread and milk, if our regular deliveries haven't got enough. Maggie isn't really allowed out, except for a daily walk, which we do. And the college opposite where we live has kindly allowed us to use their big garden to walk around.

And if you walk around our back garden, it takes you about one minute. But New College, which is opposite us, takes us about 20 minutes to walk around their garden, stopping to look at the wonderful shrubs. So that's been a real blessing to us.

So we are a lot better off than somebody say who lives in high-rise and hasn't really got anywhere to go. So I'm not grumbling, but it has been very odd and actually quite tiring. Just doing the exact same things day by day.

There's a sort of weariness about that. There's a kind of mental fog and fatigue that sort of sets in. It is.

It is. I mean, today, I spent most of today thinking it was Thursday. And then I thought, wait a minute, I haven't done just in the show yet.

And that's on Wednesday. So it must still be Wednesday. I know what you mean.

We have the very same experience here. You've had been pretty productive though. Nonetheless, you've obviously been working on a number of books.

Your big commentary on Galatians, I think, is in the pipeline. The Galatians' commentary was finished. I think the week after Easter was it all possibly 10 days after Easter? That was a great relief.

And actually having the pandemic as the reason why we had to stay here was very good from that point of view, because I had hoped to have it finished about a month before that. And then I was supposed to be going to America to do some lectures. Well, the lectures were canceled.

So I just had an extra week. And of course, work expands to fill the time available and all that. But it was a blessed relief.

And then this little book on the pandemic just happened partly because you were asking me questions and other people were asking me questions. And I was forced to think through some things that I hadn't really wrestled with before. And so it turned into another book.

Well, this is the book I just wanted to ask you briefly about at the beginning here. And people may have further questions too, as we see them come in. But it's called "God and the Pandemic," published by SBCK and Zondervan.

So in general, in terms, without obviously being able to cover everything that's in that booklet, where do you see God in the midst of all of this craziness? Well, I think the answer to where do we see God always, if you're a Christian, has to come and be filtered through the question of Jesus himself. And one of the things that I'm trying to do in the book is to try to enable anyone who reads it and to grow up in terms of how we read the whole Bible as a narrative. Because people were coming back at me and saying, well, the prophet Amos says that God punishes people for their iniquity by sending plagues or whatever.

So surely that's what's going on now. There are a wait a minute, wait a minute. There are other strands in the Old Testament as well.

And you only understand how they all work together when you put Jesus in the middle of

the picture and work back to the Old Testament from him and then forwards into the Christian life from him. And John's Jesus says, "He who has seen me has seen the Father." So when we ask, "Where is God in this?" I don't want to answer that question without it being Jesus shaped. There's been far too much of that in modern Western Christianity, actually trying to talk about God in general as though God is the celestial CEO and Jesus is the one who comes in on the side to rescue us from our sins.

No, Jesus is the one in whom we see God and in Jesus in the gospels we see the God who weeps at the tomb of his friend. And that to me is pretty darn central in all of this right now. That we're not thinking of God as the CEO sitting upstairs pressing buttons and pulling levers and then Jesus doing a bit on the side.

We are trying to understand what it might mean that the God who the Bible speaks of comes to share and bear the pain in himself. So to put it crudely, "Where is God in the middle of this?" God is on the front line in doing the dangerous stuff out there helping the helpers, the carers, the nurses, the doctors and administering the last rights to people who need it and praying with the dying and so on. And I'm happy to say that there are many, many, many Christians both in the medical profession and among hospital chaplains and so on who are doing precisely that.

And that's the answer to "Where is God in the midst of all this?" It's not "Why isn't God doing something magic about it?" It's God as usual getting his hands dirty in order to be with his people. Yeah. I can see already that a number of questions are coming in obviously on the back but particularly actually on the back of this most recent obvious stuff that's been churning everyone up, the death of George Floyd in the USA and all of the issues that that has provoked and obviously a lot of protests, both peaceful and violent protests.

So we might get to some of that shortly. But firstly, just on a very practical level, sticking with the coronavirus and lockdown, I know that you had a letter published I think just today in the times with your thoughts on whether the government's doing enough at the moment to see that churches do at some point or at least there's a plan in place for churches to be re-opened to the public. Yes.

Yeah. It's an interesting one because I cycle around Oxford. I mean, my wife does a cycle but I can and so that's how I've been getting more exercise which has been great actually.

It's been a wonderful May, lovely weather. Oxford is empty, no tourists, no students, just being able to cycle anywhere. But I've noticed that all sorts of little places like off-licenses have been open and some quite small food stores have been open and even though they say try to practice social distancing, actually it's more or less impossible in squeezey little aisles and so on.

So when Boris Johnson then says, okay, you can have garden centers open and council rubbish tips open and that sort of thing because they're important for the community. I want to say, excuse me, churches are also important for the community. Now, don't get me wrong.

I'm not saying we should just randomly open them. You should only open a building that you can actually keep properly clean and that's difficult and also when you can maintain the appropriate social distancing. So I'm not being casual or flippant about this.

But I think the thing that has worried me is that many Western Christians and many Western non-Christians seem to assume that Christianity is just a private hobby for those who like to do that sort of thing by themselves. It's quite okay to have a streamed church service and you sit up embedding your pajamas and supposedly take part in it. I want to say, as I said in the letter, FaceTime is okay but genuine family life is different and Christianity is a team sport and not a Microsoft Teams sport.

Microsoft Teams is better than nothing. We use it in Wycliffe Hall morning prayer. There we all are on the screen as you and I are now.

But it's not the same as actually being in the same space and sharing people's lives and being able to pray with them in that way that you can when you're face to face. So as soon as it's possible, I want to say for the public health of Christianity, which is an outward facing faith which exists for the benefit of its non-members, as William Temple said, therefore we must get the churches open as soon as it is appropriate and safe to do so and not assume that they're just a little leisure activity which can wait at the bottom of the list somewhere. That was the point I was making.

I mean, this is obviously a very practical issue for us. Lucy is the minister of work you want to see here. It's kind of all those dilemmas aren't there about when is right.

What would it be like anyway once we do return with all of the essential services? Yeah, I think that's the big question that we're all asking, especially those of us in leadership in the church because we're hearing different views from members of our church families, some of whom are desperate to get back and be able to worship together and others who are frightened because we know that this virus is still out there, it's still active, it hasn't gone away. So what could gathering together for worship look like and will it be anything that we recognise? And there's been a lot of conversation certainly here in our church family about singing and how important singing is to the act of worship and what might be possible. Yeah, I know that in the German churches they've been allowed to meet but not sing.

The thought of German church is not singing is just a contradiction in terms. It's a strange time and one we just have to navigate as we find our way through, but obviously what your plea was for the government to just take it seriously and not see it as a sign. I

got a memo from somebody yesterday which said that the Bishop of London, who is of course herself a very, has been a very senior nurse and got an award for that.

She's Dame, Sarah Mullally. She has got people drawn up plans into the detail of what sort of a pen you should have to sign the registers for a marriage. And once we get down to that kind of detail it shows we are taking this very seriously.

We're not just saying, okay, let's just go ahead and do whatever. And we must go on taking it seriously like that. Well, I think it's about time to turn to some of the questions that are coming in.

Thank you for all of those who are already sending in questions. It's great to see them coming piling in already. I can see that we've got a lot of people watching already, over a thousand people watching at present and I'm sure more people will join across the course of the show.

So just before we take some of those questions which you can leave by the way in the comments section wherever you're watching this Facebook Live video. I do just want to give a quick shout out to NT Right online, brilliant website where you can find Tom's video courses. They actually have a free ebook that you can get hold of.

If you just go to the website go to [NT Right online.org/askNT Right](http://NTRightonline.org/askNTRight) and it's all on the story of Acts 15. And it's absolutely free if you sign up there to become part of that. Yeah, and we in Woking United Reform Church are studying the book of Acts.

We felt particularly cool to study that just recently. So we picked it up from the Ascension, Pentecost and now we're following on through the book of Acts. So Woking Your Seafate, you should all be downloading that book.

And it's no secret that a certain commentary called Acts for Everyone is featuring frequently in the preparation. It's always lying around in our house. You know, writing that whole series, the Acts one was one of my favorites because I'd never written an exposition of Acts or taught a whole course all the way through Acts before.

And I'd forgotten what a page turn of the book of Acts is. It is. Every page.

Something else. And the way it builds up and accumulates, it's an extraordinary book. Well just next door, Tom, we've got a whole puppet stage set up which we use in our livestream services.

Myself and the children get behind there every Sunday and tell them one of the stories from Acts. Wonderful. Wonderful.

Exciting. We're bringing it to life hopefully. Anyway, yes, we are going to go to some of your questions now that have been coming in.

Thank you very much. Do keep them coming in the comments and we'll get to as many of them as we can over the course of the next hour. Now obviously the big question that has been coming in and before we go to some of the other issues that obviously people want to talk about has been all of the events recently in the USA.

And we've got a couple of questions here. One of them is from Anthony who says hello from Columbus Ohio. I imagine that this is on the mind of many here and have seen some questions related to it but I'm wondering Tom what your view is on the appropriate response to social and racial tensions in the United States.

In particular I think of Amos. I find myself stuck and unsure of what steps I should take. Could you provide some guidance on this topic in particular and political activism in general? And there are lots of other similar questions.

I'll just give you one more of a similar nature. David who asks what role should the church play in responding to the present issues around racial animosity and reconciliation in the world? State issues Tom. Wow these are huge questions and I'm sure there are many people in America listening or watching indeed.

I've got one or two American friends. One in San Francisco I think who said she was going to be watching and one in I think Bend, Oregon who may be watching as well as a friend in New York and I think he and his family may be watching. So hi guys and nice to be able to be in touch with you.

But we have obviously been horrified at everything that's been going on and that particularly the thing that really goals me is that I remember I was around I'm old enough to remember when Martin Luther King was shot in 1968. I happened to be in Toronto in Canada at the time and I remember the great crowd the next day in Nathan Phillips Square in downtown Toronto with tens of thousands of people all singing we shall overcome and there was a sense then that okay Martin Luther King has died and horrible is that but this is going to be an end of it and from now on it's all going to be all right. And I look back 50 years and I say what's changed? How has that been the case? And I really don't know the answer to that but I do know and this is a hard thing to say but the churches ever since the Reformation have accidentally colluded with the division of worshipers themselves into different ethnic linguistic etc groups because the imperative in the 16th century to worship in one's own language meant that you had a German speaking church, a Czech church, an English church, a French church etc etc which then when it spreads worldwide can quite easily become oh well they're down the road so they're the ones from Egypt or they're the ones from India so they do their thing and we may wave at them but we're not actually engaging with them and quite accidentally this wasn't anybody's game plan I think.

That then was picked up by some of the racist theories of Darwinism in the 19th century to say oh well the races are actually different and that people like that have to

have that place in society and people like us have to have this place in society and guess who normally came out on top of course white Anglo-Saxon Protestants as usual and the churches have not preached against that because for some reason I mean I've just written the commentary on Galatians as you know and in Galatians it's so clear there is neither Jew or Greek slave nor free no male and female you're all one in Messiah Jesus but that has got drowned out by the language of salvation of going to heaven or being saved by grace through faith now I'm all for being saved by grace through faith that's absolutely there but part of the point of that is that we are not saved we are not graced by being born with one particular skin color or whatever has that been preached in our churches I don't think it has I've heard many sermons on Romans and Galatians I've hardly ever heard people get to that particular point but in the first century that was so vital that Paul says in Romans 15 which is the climax of Romans this is all said that with one heart and voice you made together worship and glorify the God who is the father of Jesus so I think the church has to look in the mirror and say hang on you know we have not been doing this right we have not encouraged and fostered the multi ethnic community which was the original New Testament vision for the church and then as a result society has just gone its own way and we've had Chinese churches we've had black churches we've had this we've had that we've had the other and okay there are different styles of worship which we may like but we need all of us to remind ourselves that this isn't good enough we need one another the church is designed at the polychrome because the whole point about the church is that it's the model of the genuine new humanity of every nation and kindred and tribe and tongue that says so in the book of Revelation and if we took that seriously but that at the center of the agenda that would send a signal out into the wider world so I was delighted ten years ago and every was when John Center who became Archbishop of York was fifty years ago Michael Ramsey their Archbishop had said there will come a time when a black African will become Archbishop of York and Center who is able to say we've at least done that now please can we move on from there so I think that is absolutely vital and maybe this will be a further wake up call but I think there are some hard questions to be asked sociologically and social psychologically as well and not just in America though obviously it's been a big issue in America and all of us I suppose that the question that comes to mind though is as you see this outpouring of grief and anger absolutely justifiably and understandably across many cities and so on how do we express that how should Christians aim to make sure that that is a redemptive force rather than simply a reaction the model here I think is Jesus himself because as I've argued in various places Jesus was what I call a double revolutionary when Jesus announced God's kingdom this meant that God is king and Caesar isn't and Herod isn't and none of you lot running the temple are in charge actually because this is God's king and that's a revolutionary message now so far Jesus might have been on the same page as the violent revolutionaries of his day of whom there were many and different warring groups within them as well as we know from the historian Josephus but Jesus then also said and by the way this kingdom doesn't come through that kind of violence that some of you are wanting to do this kingdom

comes like a seed growing secretly it comes like a farmer out in his field sowing and some fails and some has a great crop it's like a father with two sons and it's like a person is throwing a wedding banquet for their son and so on and all these images are ways of saying yes to the kingdom which is the revolutionary thing that says that the present power brokers aren't in fact in charge because God is in charge but no to the way that people are normally doing it and that of course is what Martin Luther King did so well and he was caught on this by the black power leaders in the 60s I remember it only too well they said oh you're just a wimp because you believe in non-violence and obviously nothing's going to change until we actually get to real violence same thing with Desmond Tutu in South Africa who has called all the names under the sun not only by the white supremacists but also by the hard line people of violence are from the black communities and he stuck to the Jesus shaped line and somehow we have to articulate what that's going to look like for the next generation and that will be different in different contexts I suspect different in different cities in America in the northwest it wouldn't be the same as in say Atlanta or Birmingham Alabama where I was just a few months ago and I saw some of the Martin Luther King exhibits and some of the key sites there so I think there's a lot to be learned but that model of Jesus announcing the kingdom which is the basic revolutionary message that the power break brokers are getting it wrong and there is a different way but then the double revolution of saying that we mustn't do it that way pointing the finger at the people of violence and you then see the same turnaround in Saul of Tarsus who was a violent zealot who then became Paul the apostle the apostle of the love of God perhaps towards the end of the show we can pray for that situation which is obviously so many people's hearts and minds at the moment. We've got another question though, do you want to do this one Lisa? Yeah this question is actually back to some biblical exegesis now it's come from a member of our church family I mentioned that we're studying the book of Acts and Margaret in Woking says that she's rereading your commentary early church letters for everyone and having just finished Peter's second letter I feel again that I'd like to know so much more about his later life where he travelled to as well as Rome he features prominently in the early chapters of Acts and then almost disappears could you tell us what scholars know about Peter beyond what we learn in the New Testament and all his letters also written mainly in prison how do we know about his crucifixion there you go there's plenty to have a go out there. Yeah the answer is sadly we don't really know about very much of that the legends about Peter get going sometime in the second century and you can put together a kind of collage of the different things that people came to believe I think it is highly likely that he died as a martyr in either Nero's persecution or one of the persecutions of the time in Rome we don't actually have first hand evidence of that there are archaeological excavations and they think they may have found his tomb etc etc I'm not sure that that's been verified but acts itself is quite secretive about it as you know in Acts 12 when Peter was about to be killed and he gets out of jail free and he comes and knocks on the door and the maid doesn't open it because she's so excited it's a rather funny scene it simply says at the end that he left and went somewhere else doesn't say

where why did Luke put it like that was it because Peter then went to Rome but because of course Peter is then back in Jerusalem for Acts 15 which is the so-called apostolic conference and Paul in Galatians mentions meeting Peter and James and John in Galatians chapter 2 which I think is the meeting described in Acts chapter 11 whether the so-called famine visit so Peter seems to be too and fro and but I'm afraid this is just typical of ancient history there's also if I studied ancient history as my first degree there's all sorts of things that we would love to know that we just don't have the evidence and maybe somebody will find a manuscript to text a stone or something which will tell us but I would like to know the answers as well so I'm sorry Margaret I don't have a huge amount of information of course people have written books putting together the legends and yes you can spin that one out but they are just that they're legends they don't have the same character of solid historical evidence that we've got in the New Testament itself and as to whether his letters are written from prison I don't see any reason why they should have been but I couldn't put my hand on my heart and say that they definitely weren't either.

Well just a reminder if you're watching live you can ask a question too feel free to place it in the comments wherever you're watching this Facebook live video and again you can subscribe to the podcast and catch up on all kinds of other questions too that's by visiting askentiright.com okay another question okay well actually I'm going to sneak in one from our own family here Tom and a take full advantage and one of the one of the things that we've started doing more as a family since this pandemic started and we've been you know shot together in our home is reading the Bible at meal times together and I'm packing some of the stories and it generates great conversations among our children and among us and actually helps us to see things in the text that perhaps we hadn't noticed before that the children draw out and one of the things that was being asked around our dinner table was we've often wondered how well we've been wondering how these transformative encounters with Jesus in the gospels such as you know the woman at the well the blind man and so on how they went on in their faith because we know that we all need nurturing and building up it's why we gather together and why we listen to preaching and we read books and we do all sorts of things to enhance our faith and grow deeper in our faith but what about those people they had a kind of almost like a flashing counter with Jesus that changed their life but what can we know about how their faith was nurtured that that's another great question and I again I wish I had more detail to answer it with but it looks as though in the early church after the resurrection ascension of Jesus and after the gift of the spirit there were already little cells of Jesus followers and if you look at Matthew's gospel some of the instructions which Matthew records Jesus is giving for instance in Matthew chapter 18 when it's about forgiveness and relations within the community it looks as though these are instructions for little groups Jesus says where two or three gather in my name I'm there in their midst and it says though when Jesus has been in a town or a village and when he's announced the kingdom and when people have believed it some people then get called to follow him

and go around with him most people get called to stay where they are and be part of this little cell group this little group of double revolutionaries if you like this little group of Jesus shaped kingdom of God people and they have been taught by Jesus how to be that sort of person and no doubt they're wrestling with and trying to remember the stories Jesus told and some of the the one liners that he gave as he went around and they're living on that and then after Pentecost when things really take off then those little cells become part of a much larger movement so that there is already a dispersed church in Jerusalem in Samaria in Galilee and so on ready to go and do all sorts of new things now of course knowing what I know and know what you know about pastoral work you can't assume that therefore everything's just going to work out fine and that everyone who's ever met Jesus will stay as a faithful follower forever and ever are men certainly the history of the church doesn't encourage us to think that for a moment and that the how we know things are in our own lives likewise but I think that's the key that Jesus seems to have had this vision of starting these little groups wherever he went and saying now here's how you are to live amongst yourselves as my followers as as kingdom people but a different sort of kingdom people and whenever you meet to pray here's the prayer you pray and when you meet in my name I am there in the midst that's a remarkable thing and I think they clung on to that promise and they found his presence with them and then when the spirit was given off to Pentecost then they realized how it was all to work that's I think how it must have been. We've got another question that's coming on the issue of coronavirus so returning to that someone asks simply the question do you think it's Craig actually do you think there will be a revival because of Covid-19 now there's been lots of speculation I suppose about what God might be doing in and through this whole unusual moment I suppose there's always that danger of being too speculative and claiming to know you know exactly what's going on but I think there are these hopes like you know perhaps Craig has that even though we're not able to meet as a church actually this will be sparking the kind of questions in people's minds and hearts that might actually provoke some kind of a response in the long run. Yes I'm sure that may happen and let me say when we're talking about what might God be doing I really do want to stress God is God I'm not his private advisor if God wants to do A or B or C that is God's business and I will pray thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as in heaven and it's up to God as to what that will is and how that prayer gets answered so there is a danger though and one of the things I try to nail in the book that people say because God is sovereign if X and Y and Z have happened this must be because God wanted them or at least permitted them therefore there must have been a reason for that therefore we must be able to figure out what that was and the short answer to that is go and read the book of Job because even at the end of the book of Job it's not really quite clear exactly what it was all about and I think that's part of the point that there are many many things that happen that we can't and shouldn't try to find a nice rational answer this has happened so that this could happen so that that could happen now if out of tragedy and sorrow God wants to do something radically new well that's characteristic we see it in the cross specifically that one of the worst things the worst thing that human

beings ever could do who'sifying the Son of God turned out to be in the strange mercy of God one of the most amazing and fruitful and life enhancing things that we could ever possibly imagine so if God wants to do that that's fine but I'm not holding my breath we've had a couple of other big different crises in the last 20 years we had 9/11 obviously at the beginning of the present century and then in 2008 we had a major global financial crash on both occasions the Western world got it wrong in the first case we went to war on Iraq and dropped bombs on a lot of civilians and goodness knows what and we scared up crazy new groups and the last state has been worse than the first after 2008 when the poorest people in the world really desperately needed help the people who got the help of the richest people in the world who asked the government for handouts and they got them and they went back to business as usual while the poor got poorer in the background and nobody seemed to pay much attention so I don't think we can say simply ah here's a crisis so God is now going to do something great through it of course if people realize just how close to death we all live all the time I would say actually you should think that every time you get in the car and drive down a motorway but still and many other things that we do every day that are actually quite risky and dangerous too but yes if we are alerted to our mortality and made to think about hang on what is life and death all about well good and the churches should be there to help gently not to ram it down their throats now that you've thought about covid now it's time to hear the gospel you know because that's just going to be counterproductive certainly in any society that I know so that I think the idea that we can see a purpose is a bit too far a bit too fast I think what we are called to do is be reticent and be humble and say we live in a very strange world we believe in the sovereignty of God but the sovereignty of God is defined by Jesus by who he is and what he did and what he suffered not thinking of God as the master mechanic who presses the buttons and pulls the levers and makes everything happen that's just the wrong image of the divine sovereignty so we have to be very very careful before we second guess at the same time we should pray for every opportunity of course for more people to hear about Jesus and to come to believe that that's a given and obviously we do believe God is in the business of redeeming the worst things that's the story at the center of it all what I love about the show we do together they ask and to write anything podcast Tom is that it's not just Christians but it's people of other faith traditions agnostics skeptics seekers who who listen along and who often ask the questions and I think we've got one here from Adam who's asking the question oh it's just going to be good I guess there it is who I believe it is probably a skeptic asking this actually from the feed they're going out on the Christian evidence society and says now Dr. Robert Price who's a well known skeptic calls rather cheekily calls Tom empty wrong because he he thinks that first century Judaism was kept completely free from the influence of paganism altogether but nothing could be further from the truth says Adam so so he's saying that Bob Robert Price claims that you say that first century Judaism was kept completely free from the influence of paganism now I happen to know that Rob Price is a Jesus mythicist and believes that the stories of Jesus that were created at a frankly were importing other pagan myths of the time be they you know

Babylonian Egyptian motifs which were eventually put together in in what we receive as the gospel so now that let's accept it is in scholarship a very non mainstream view to put it mildly but what's your response to this sort of thing and and how are you going to claim back the title NT right rather than you wrong I think there was a website called NT wrong I'm not sure if it's if it's wrong by that personal not I on principle have never looked at it but then I hardly ever I hardly ever look at blog sites anyway I just have a very busy life and you know there's no need to get wound up about that sort of thing but it's very hard because I have never said that there's a kind of a hermetic seal preventing pagan ideas from getting to the Jewish world it might be perhaps a riff on some of the things I've said about Jewish views of resurrection I know some skeptics in America and elsewhere have come back at me on the meaning of resurrection and so what we're saying actually happened to Jesus etc etc but but it's pretty clear I mean if Jesus had wanted to take his disciples to see a play by Euripides on stage they could have just walked down the road from their base in Galilee to make Chiran just the southern just south of the lake of Galilee where there was a full Greek style theatre and there were many other such places and in Jerusalem as well and they were gymnasium and that's part of the problem that the Maccabees face two centuries before Jesus was the Hellenization and as they saw it the paganization of the Jewish homeland although the idea of a Jewish homeland as well isn't exactly right there wasn't a land with boundaries saying Jews inside here everybody else out the Jewish homeland was basically Jerusalem and its surrounding area and Galilee and that bits of that are up but even in Galilee though Nazareth seems to have been a fairly orthodox Jewish town just up the road walking distance away is Cephurus which was a major centre of Greco-Roman culture so let's I don't know where that idea has come from certainly I've never said it and it's not part of anything that would be load bearing for a presentation about Jesus but let me say this about the mythicists and I haven't read very much of that because you know I'm an ancient historian I'm trying the whole time to live in the world of the actual sources I want every coin every inscription every document from whatever source it is I don't know if you can see behind my head on the top shelf back there is a lot of Greco-Roman classics the Latin and Greek classics and I love that stuff I want to know more and more about it and when I read it I then look at the Jewish literature of the time and I say well yes this is book wisdom of Solomon in some ways it's very like Paul in other ways it's got signs of Stoic influence in other ways it's got signs of Platonic influence which I don't see in Paul or not in that way or Paul arguing with it perhaps but not dependent on it and so on and if that's true of wisdom of Solomon it's true of many other writings as well particularly the historian Josephus who I've mentioned before but the crucial thing is surely this the mythicists if I understand them are right tend to say that the gospel stories were invented let's say 50 or 100 years later in order to start a new religion a religion of following this mythical character Jesus but the thing is that early Christianity wasn't a religion either in the modern sense or in the ancient sense they didn't have animal sacrifices they didn't have church buildings they didn't have a priestly caste they didn't go and consult oracles it didn't look like what the ancient world thought of as

religion at all it looked like a cross between a kind of a synagogue community but this was for everybody or a philosophical school in that they were teaching people teaching to read often enough and then particularly a political organization because any society that brought together this ramshackle collection of Jews and Greeks and slaves and free and men and women all muddled in together living a life of obedience to Jesus a life of worship but a life of service to the poor and to those who are sick and needy nobody had ever seen anything like this before they wouldn't have said oh it's a new religion they would have said what on earth did they think they're doing and they said we're following Jesus now the thing that they were doing in following Jesus was radically new you in order to explain it if you take away Jesus you're going to have to invent somebody else roughly the same sort of person probably with the same name as well and once you've done that of course the thing becomes absurd you've got another question I think Lucy oh I think we're going to do this one here okay yeah we've had a question from Elizabeth Argus and her question is about the beatitudes in Matthew 5 she says can you explain what the phrase poor in spirit means she says it's the first beatitude so it must be the foundational one yes I'm not sure it's the foundational one I've never been clear as to whether they build out like that in a kind of reverse pyramid or whether in fact if you translate them back into Aramaic which I know some people have tried to do then they do have a kind of assonance a kind of memorable flow and it may have been that Jesus in his original teaching of them simply wanted to give people almost like a jingle that they could memorize and we have to realize of course that Jesus was a wandering teacher in the days before print media let alone radio let alone podcasts or whatever and wandering teachers in that sort of context say the same things again and again and again but often they come out slightly differently so when we compare the feminine Matthew with the equivalent material in Luke it comes out slightly differently and I don't think that this means that one of them got it right and the other one got it wrong it just means Jesus was always saying this kind of thing but here's the thing about both pure and pure in heart or sorry poor in spirit and then pure in heart later on but the others as well we are inclined and for many years I was inclined to look at the Beatitudes and think of them in terms of here of the moral qualities to which I should aspire well I still want to say yes we should aspire to these qualities but the danger then is that we think that these are the moral exams which we have to pass in order to qualify for to live with God or whatever it is that's not what this list is about at all this list is about this is what the kingdom of God looks like and I think Justin's heard me say this before maybe some of some other listeners have as well but people often say why does God allow this to happen why did God let the Holocaust happen why doesn't God step in and stop whatever's going on and people want God to press the button which says frees the frame right there stop now they want God to send in the tanks and the Sermon on the mount is about the quality of people through whom God brings God's kingdom and I think the the poor in spirit there is about humility I think it's about people who are prepared to say okay my ideas of what the kingdom of God would look like would be thus and so you know people sometimes play the game if I were king for a day what would I do etc etc

the answer is no I'm not going to go there I'm going to take my instructions for the shape of what the kingdom should look like from God himself even if that means some of my cherished ideals have to be set aside or lost entirely and so the king the the Sermon on the mount is saying when God wants to change the world he doesn't send in the tanks he sends in the poor in spirit the meek the humble the broken hearted the mourners the hungry for just as people the peacemakers and they are the ones through whom the world gets changed and maybe it does if not start with at least focus on the poor in spirit because it's one of the interesting things about early Christianity that humility was never seen as a virtue in the ancient world the Greeks the Romans humility that's for the birds you got to stand up for yourself but you see it coming through in Paul where the idea of when I am weak then I am strong where did Paul get that idea from I think it comes ultimately from Jesus about the poor in spirit who are the ones through whom God can then do extraordinary things in the world fantastic we've got a question here from a fairly young person Noah is asking a question and it's a very direct simple question if we live forever in heaven and you might want to talk about that you've written a lot about that whole concept but he says if we live forever in heaven wouldn't it become boring after a while the answer is yes no the normal views that people have of heaven might well become boring there was a far side cartoon some years ago which had a guy sitting on a cloud looking around him and saying gee I wish I brought a magazine and I get that you know all right but of course you can then deconstruct that by saying well God would make it exciting anyway well yes and no and I think mostly no I think all that we know about think what what we already know about God if God is the creator of the world God made this amazing place full of music and laughter full of extraordinary creatures like elephants and giraffes and anteaters and so on and full of people like you and me and people who are interesting and different and people who know in their bones that they're made to do certain things you know my wife and I've moved so often that we're not great gardeners and we've just moved to Oxford recently we just planted a couple of roses and we're discovering again the joy of even a simple tiny little garden hey we can do things and there's all sorts of things that humans know in their bones that they're meant to do and I think that's because we are image bearers we are called to be creative like God reflecting God's creative stewardship into the world and I really think if we know anything about God the world to come which is the new heavens and the new earth when heaven and earth come together that's what we're promised not this going to heaven forever stuff but the new creation that will be a time when everything that we glimpse of purpose and vocation and possibility and art and music and drama and so on that will be enhanced it will be much more than we have at the moment just as Jesus resurrection body was more not less than his pre-resurrection body it was transformed was still physical but now had other properties so I think our future life will be like this present one only much much more so and it will be richly extraordinary in terms of all the things that we will be called to do to make God's glory fill his new creation I can understand people though who think that if that life is simply an eternal church service of the sort we normally experience it we might not want to be in it forever and ever we

are a CS Lewis fan and I've always loved the way CS Lewis ends the Narnia books in the last battle and you see that vision of the children and Azlan going into this into Azlan's country and how it says that it turned out that all of their adventures up to that point had only been the title the cover and the title page and that they were starting on an adventure where every chapter was more exciting than the one before yes I think that Lewis is exactly right there and Lewis had got this vision of new creation he didn't follow it through in all of his writings it's an interesting thing about Lewis and he didn't claim to be a professional theologian as it were but he got that sense that the best is yet to be brilliant and Tom I want to make sure you have a chance to drink something and accept I'm just while you're doing that I'll just reiterate that if you're wanting to ask a question here on the Facebook live stream with Tom you're welcome to to put a question in the comments and they'll come through to us and we'll try and make sure to read as many as possible again if you'd like to subscribe to the podcast in the newsletter of the ask and write anything show where I sit down with Tom on a regular basis and ask these sorts of questions then do go to ask ntwrite.com there's a link in the Facebook description from the show today and just a reminder that also ntwrite online.org/askntwrite if you go there there's a free ebook as well that will make its way to you if you sign up so anyway back to the questions and where are we going next we're going to ah yes there's there's a rather um okay here's one that comes around very frequently in my experience especially among skeptics um Kevin do you want to ask this one actually Lucy this one here here we go okay yeah Kevin rally um he'd like to ask how do we recommend reconcile St. Paul's attitude to slavery obedience to the master and so on which is often referenced in scripture um with our modern abhorrence of slavery our rightly modern abhorrence of slavery yeah I mean this is a good question and it demands some historical background and focus in the ancient world anybody could become a slave or you had to do is lose a battle or maybe lose your job and you could just either sell yourself or somebody just corral you into being into being a slave in other words there wasn't a slave I mean there was a slave class but it was very fluid and flexible and a lot of slaves actually either bought their freedom or were given their freedom and were able to make their way in the world the Roman emperor Claudius who was emperor when Paul was starting his missionary journeys he relied for his his three favorite civil servants were all freed men they had been slaves who've been freed and they were very able people so slavery in the ancient world was very different from what we think of in terms of particularly obviously um in the 19th century the 18th and 19th century when ships would go to Africa and scoop up boatloads of unfortunate Africans and take them across to the new world to the Caribbean and to North America and keep them as a separate cast a separate class and that as I said before got bound up with all sorts of racial theories and so on there's nothing racial about slavery in the ancient world in the Mediterranean world which Paul knew and skin pigmentation wasn't an issue there were many many different colors and that had nothing to do with slavery now of course slavery was in many quarters a pretty vile institution because slaves were property and masters and mistresses could do literally whatever they wanted with them and what we

see in the New Testament though has to be judged in terms of what the possibilities were at the time an awful lot of things which today we do through machines through the internal combustion engine through electricity through gas etc all of that stuff was done by human beings and they would be servants or they would be slaves and there would be a sliding scale between somebody who was a slave who's actually your property you'd still have to feed them and house them otherwise they wouldn't be any used to anyway and servants who would be working for you and there would be a graded hierarchy we don't much like hierarchies but that was how the whole ancient world worked and what Paul does is it's rather like Jesus being a double revolutionary Paul doesn't just say you should all give up your slaves at once that would be about as much use as you or me standing up in church on a Sunday morning and saying we all now know that car engines are polluting the atmosphere this is clearly not God's will so I want you to leave your cars in the church car park we'll have a scrap merchant come around and we'll give you each 10 10 quid for them after the service because you're never going to be using those again because you're following Jesus instead and I think most of us would say that's actually not how to fight that particular battle it may be that in a hundred years time people will look back and say oh right you were such a wimp in 2020 you said we didn't have to give up our cars we should have done well I'm sorry there is a kind of a realism about this and if this is why in the letter to Philemon the little letter at the end of the Pauline canon Paul is very subtle about hinting what he wants Philemon to do with his ex slave Onesimus who has run away and come to Paul and Paul puts a kind of a depth charge against the whole institution rather like actually the philosopher Seneca was doing at the same time those Seneca himself had slaves like Thomas Jefferson in America who said that all people were equal but he still had slaves and he didn't exactly treat them all that well so I'm told either but in the middle of all of this what we see is the gospel starting as a movement which says neither slave nor free and which then has to live with how that works out in practice it starts in worshiping together it starts in other words in the slaves being part of the family and we have to think of early Christianity as a family as brothers and sisters recognizing and welcoming one another as such and then navigating the very difficult social consequences that result from that because one of the things Paul was very anxious about was that the early Christians wouldn't get the reputation of being the wrong sort of revolutionaries you're the sort who started that great riot where we had 20,000 slaves on the march etc that they had long memories of things like the Spartacus revolution so yes we wish of course the depth charge had gone off much sooner and actually it was only really able to happen when we did get modern technology and machines so there are big questions to ask there as well but we have to beware of moralizing back from what we think of as 19th century slavery and imagine that it was always just like that I'm not excusing what they did in the ancient world I'm saying let's put ourselves in Paul's shoes and imagine what are we going to do to address that is yeah yeah I often think of it as being that Paul as it were was started the trajectory if you would of that sort of emancipation and the view that obviously is now current but which what he was doing in his time was radical

for its time in terms of the way he put slave masters on level when it came to their their worship of Christ and so on absolutely absolutely we've got another question here this takes us in another direction um Marshall asks are other religions completely deceived or is it possible that they have elements that are also inspired by God clearly Christianity looks at everything through Jesus but I ask because there are many similarities between religions almost as though God has revealed truth through them but why would God reveal some truth but not Christ so yeah there's a there's a tough one to get your teeth into oh a wonderful question and but it strikes me speaking as an ancient historian strikes me as a very modern question because the concept of religion and there being different religions is an 18th century invention which surprised a lot of people at the time but it sort of caught on because this was at a time when the popular mood in the western world was to imagine God ever more distant with deism or even the revived epicureanism God is a long way away so we do stuff down here which is vaguely godward related or vaguely ethically related and so we call what we do down here religions two things to say about that first that isn't what the word religion meant in the ancient world at all had quite different meanings second it isn't what actually the Christian the word that Christians you religion meant until the 18th century if you'd ask somebody in the 16th century about that religion they would have thought you meant what liturgy do you use in your worship in church which is a different question so we need to be aware that the way the question is phrased is very much within a modernist paradigm which sees the religions lined up and sort of ticks off different features of them oh this one has this that one has that now in fact there are radical differences radical differences obviously Christianity as we know it the following Jesus movement if you like grows directly out of and from within the world of the ancient Jews which is rooted in the world of ancient Israel going back to the patriarchs Abraham Isaac and Jacob and the relationship between the followers of Jesus and those Jews who decided not to follow Jesus in the first century and subsequently has always been a fraught and difficult one that's a kind of a special case but then the relationship with the prophet Muhammad and the religion we think of as Islam that's a very different thing again and Islam is not just people talk about the three monotheistic religions Christianity Judaism and Islam actually they're very different and Islam says there is one god and Muhammad is his prophet Judaism says there is one god and Israel is his people Christianity says there is one god and Jesus of Nazareth is his son what's more the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth and actually the vision of the one god and the vision of what it means to follow and serve and worship and love that god changes radically with those three different modifiers when you then get out beyond that treating the modern category of religion for what it is at the moment into say Buddhism or Hinduism those are simply radically different kinds of things all together and it's the modernist idea of oh well some monotheistic religions some non monotheistic but they're all religions that's a way of squashing them all into a lump in order then to say as the question rather implies maybe they're all sort of the same but here's what I would say about the sameness all the so-called religions to use that language for the moment are in a measure responses to what Jews and Christians

from the beginning have seen as the revelation of the creator god in the world that when we look at the world there are signals that actually there is meaning here we're aware of things like justice and freedom and love and relationships and beauty and people respond to those signals differently sometimes within different traditions but sometimes from what what just occurs to them apparently spontaneously and so it doesn't surprise me that you see in all the so-called religions signs that people are responding to these signals some people call them signals of transcendence I live much like that language myself but something like that in the world and then it comes out differently according to different cultures and so on the difference with the Christian faith is that it is anchored in this one man who we do know about historically and who was crucified and the crucifixion of Jesus is about a secure a historical fact as Caesar crossing the Rubicon or any of those great events in ancient Rome and then that the Christians said he'd been raised from the dead and part of the evidence for that is the new energy that they had in doing what they did and in inventing a new way of being human so I would say actually it's Jesus that makes the difference Jesus and him crucified and raised from the dead none of the other so-called great religions has anything remotely like that people sometimes try to say oh well the Egyptians believed in some sort of life after dead yeah it's just not the same thing trust me on that I've offered though that Paul can be helpful here especially you know when he's at Mars Hill and and he's talking to the philosophers and those who are sharing their worldviews and and he doesn't simply dismiss their search for truth but he says you've been looking around and I can see that you're after you're grasping after this and even quotes their own philosophers and poets back to them and not by simply dismissing them but saying but here's how that all gets fulfilled it's a very interesting to and fro isn't it because he starts with the order of the unknown god oh well there you are you know that there's a god you don't know let me tell you about it fine okay and as you say quoting the poets but at the same time and many of your viewers tonight will have been to Mars Hill in Athens you stand on Mars Hill the thing you can see most prominently is the Acropolis with the wonderful temple of Athena and the Parthenon and the temple of Nike and all these other things and Paul just says by the way the almighty doesn't live in houses made with homes that lot up there they're just a category mistake so he wasn't just carrying favor just saying yes where he could say yes no where he had to say no and then he was telling the Jewish story with Jesus in the middle it's interesting at the end he says god has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness that's a direct quotation from Psalm 96 and he will judge the world in which means god is going to put the world right wow yeah the high court in Athens where he was thought it was their job to put things right Paul is saying actually it's god's job and he's going to do it and he's going to do it through Jesus we've got about another 15 minutes so we'll keep going with a few more questions there's lots of questions but these are great questions I mean they don't admit of one line answers okay we um okay a completely different tack here this is a question from David David Tooson who asks um what does it mean to fear god I'm comfortable with the concept of loving god but but we're told in the bible to fear god what does that mean our

English word fear can slide to and fro and I think of you know the fear I was driving down the road to go to the supermarket earlier today and suddenly there was a police car came screaming up behind me with flashing blue lights and my first thought was get out of the way my second thought was oh dear did I run a red light and I suddenly had that cold moment of fear of course I happen to have one would I do something and of course he was off off somebody else but there is a sort of fear which is a panic you fear like that and some people think that's what fearing god is supposed to mean and then they say well how can that coexist with love and the answer is no in in the Hebrew and which the Greek is struggling to to retain there it means reverence it means all it's the kind of awe that you feel when you walk into one of the most great lovely buildings like a huge cathedral and you have a sense of I ought to mind my piece and cues and I'm in here it's and yet it's beautiful you want to be there and yet you have a sense that you need to talk in hushed tones and be careful what you do because this place matters or or the sense you have in front of a great painting or when you come out of a wonderful theatrical performance and I remember once reading a review of a recital by Dietrich Fitt we think of being in god's presence wow we need to take this very seriously that that's what I think it's all it's about of course if you then say well god loves me so who cares I can go and do what I like then maybe an element of the fear of the flashing police car lights might just come into it we've got a question in from Jeremy Perigo he's watching over on the sbck publishing Facebook page thanks for joining us Jeremy um and Jeremy says with such a Protestant/evangelical emphasis on salvation as a cognitive understanding of key tenants but where does that leave those with cognitive or developmental disabilities what does saving faith look like for those who are differently abled great question but it's only one bit of Protestantism what maybe it's two or three bits but it's one sort of strand of modern rationalistic Protestantism that has got off on this business of you need to understand this and this and this I remember a talk I'm sitting here in Oxford just about 300 yards away from where I am and about 50 years ago by a wonderful old Christian scholar called John Wenham some of our listeners may know him as somebody who wrote a Greek grammar among other things and John Wenham did a great talk on the atonement and on all the different models and theories and ideas and biblical images about the atonement he laid this all out for about an hour it was breathtaking at the end somebody said how much of this does somebody have to believe in order to be saved and John smiled and said very little this is something about the love of God Jesus dying reaching out and grasping you with love and forgiveness I sort of fear okay now that we've got that we can then explore it right but we don't have to believe all the theory in order to be saved that's a mistake people often make people imagine that we are justified by faith by believing in justification by faith we are not we are justified by faith by believing in Jesus and believing in Jesus means like the woman in the crowd who had the issue of blood and she comes and she touches the hem of his garment that's enough that's enough and if later she wants to go and ask one of the disciples just how does that work how does his then dying on the cross kind of validate by being rescued well we can talk about that but the important thing is just hold on and

trust and part of the point about faith is that actually the Greek word pistus doesn't simply mean a cognitive awareness of the faith it can go in that direction but it means loyalty it means allegiance it means sticking with this person you know when beginning of John 11 Jesus says it's time to go back to Jerusalem guys and they say hang on they wanted to kill you surely you don't want to go back there and Thomas says okay let's go so that we can die with him that's a kind of a dogged allegiance and it's used to me that though Thomas my namesake is called doubting Thomas there's quite a lot of faith in there okay if this is where Jesus is going we're going with him and I think that's just fine that's good enough yeah a completely different subject matter now um more more of an ethical question this comes from Joanne in West Biflete and she says I suffer from a rare genetic medical condition which results in eye deterioration among other things I'm a Christian my question is why does God allow us to be born like this and also she asks what are your views about stem cell implants in terms of Christian ethics and the Bible there's lots of research being done in this topic and she's hopeful for it being considered but she's getting advice from Christian friends in different directions which are causing tension yeah yeah bless her well yeah deep sympathy and prayerful hope for you and for anyone else in that situation obviously when somebody is born with a particular medical condition that makes them unable to do and be the sort of things that most of their friends and family are able to do and be then there are all sorts of questions and actually having been a pastor for a long time most families that I know including my own have somebody who has some kind of medical condition that makes you just think why did this happen why did it have to be um and I don't think we're given answers to that as I say in the little book about the pandemic when the disciples in Antioch heard that there was going to be a famine they didn't say why did God allow this or was it our fault had we sinned or or what is God trying to tell us or is this a sign of the end or something they said what can we do to help who is going to be at risk what can we do to help and who shall we send and so it seems to me when somebody is born with a particular condition this is a sign to the rest of the family and the friends and the community that here is somebody who needs special love and attention and care and it's actually part of my answer to mentored give to the previous question as well one of my graduate students and his wife recently had their third child and they knew at an early stage in the pregnancy this was going to be a baby with Down syndrome and unlike some who would say well we better get rid of this unwanted distraction whatever they said this is a calling to be a special kinder family my heart goes out to them I pray for them day by day and I think it's a call to the community so instead it's like the beginning of John 9 where the disciples say whose fault was it that this man was born blind and Jesus says that's the wrong question to ask the right question is what is God going to do with this situation and sometimes that might mean healing and other times it might mean a new level of love and care and compassion in the immediate and surrounding community as to stem cells I don't know I'm not a scientist I don't know all the current research all the detail I do know that people worry because the stem cells come from unborn fetuses and the idea of using human tissue in that way is a very difficult knife edge ethical decision I do

know that some of the research indicates that some use of some such material could bring real healing for people further on down the track I do not have an inside track on that particular topic but I do worry that sometimes with science in general there's a sense that we the scientists can do whatever we like so if we choose to manipulate this bit of human tissue this way well don't worry because it'll be it'll work out and be good for many people in the long run well maybe but maybe not one of the things we're learning in the pandemic I think is that the science isn't as easy as all that and that the scientists are forming hypotheses and they need to factor in the ethical issues as well so I'm sorry I don't have the absolute answer on that you probably wouldn't trust me if I claim that I did but I think it's something we need to pray for the scientists and with them and make sure that if that's a concern for us that we are catching up with the best and most recent research and Christian writing on the subject.

Thank you so much Tom for your time we're going to go to a final question in just a moment just just another quick word though to say if you're watching and you've been enjoying tonight's broadcast do feel free to get more of them by listening to the Ask Anti-Write Anything podcast again the link is in the description askantiwrite.com and if you subscribe to the newsletter you'll also be kept up to date with what's going on with the show and any additional content we put out there including things like today's broadcast so I just also want to give a shout out to our youth group who are watching tonight Tom they're Woking United Reform Church youth group along with the only our youth worker and there was a question but I'm not going to bring it now because I know we're going to be dealing with I think on a podcast we've already recorded and we'll go out soon which is on that thorny question of the book in the book of Acts and a nice and sefira and what happens to them and so we'll leave that because I know it's getting dealt with either has been or will be dealt with on a future podcast because it's come up before but in any case I thought a good question maybe to end our time with is this one from Matthew Collins who has submitted this over at the anti-write online Facebook page and says how does one who has walked away from faith in the past come back to faith and receive Jesus how does one become a Christian it's a fairly direct question but I suppose in the sense of well if you have had faith and you feel like it slipped away for whatever reason or you lost it entirely but you've somehow come back to wanting something again what would you what would you be your practical advice for someone who wants to reconnect with that faith and well as he says to become a Christian yes the phrase become a Christian means many different things to many different people a Christian is basically somebody who who clings on to Jesus who wants to be a Jesus follower a Jesus friend who clings on to him because as the disciples say to who else should we go you have the words of eternal life we're not finding this in anyone else and of course all Christians that I know oscillate and wobble about in their faith one of the things that I love about the Lord's Prayer which Jesus gave us is that I say it every day sometimes several times a day that it has this cause forgive us our trespasses because I always need that every time I come back to say it there's been something that I've done that I've messed up so

in a sense we all wobble away from faith and we all if we want to stick with it have to come back again it doesn't mean we've stopped being Christians in the meantime of course it may be that somebody had only a superficial outward experience and it never really went very deep they were never actually immersed in the love of God in a life transforming way in the way that being a Christian ought to mean but again it's very much an individual personality thing and anyone asking me that question if they were here in the room I would say let's put the kettle on let's have a cup of coffee and let's just talk about where you've come from what your personal history is what got in the way what was worrying you what in your background has made this difficult or easy or whatever and people often email me and ask me these detailed pastoral questions say I cannot be your pastor at long distance your pastoral work happens face to face ideally you can do a bit on the phone but really it has to be somebody who can get to know you and who you can trust and share your innermost secrets with and then they may tell you you know it looks to me as though you've never really received the presence and love of Jesus Christ into your innermost being and it's time you did and here's how or it may be that there are that they will see that there really is a deep a deep love of God somewhere but it's been buried under all sorts of other things and you need to find out what's cluttering up the mess and get back to that deeply buried thing so there are all these different images one can use at the heart of it I've mentioned the Lord's Prayer I would say go back to praying the Lord's Prayer and pray it slowly pray it thoughtfully maybe clause by clause breathe in breathe out think about your world your life hold it in the presence of God and then go on to the next clause how would be their name whichever one you're at that's that's one way of getting as it were back in or in for the first time in it Jesus gave his followers that prayer there was a reason why he did that and that's a great way in another way is simply to take one or other of the four gospels and again read it slowly and prayerfully you know switch off the machines don't have any screens operative put the phone in the other room shut the door say Lord Jesus Christ son of the living God have mercy on me a sinner and now show me and then read through Mark which is the shortest or John which is the richest perhaps or Matthew or Luke and just see what it is that Jesus is saying to you and see what happens when with that story you find yourself at the foot of the cross and when you come to the foot of the cross in that story hold on and don't let go and say you did all that for me and then see what happens when you get through to the resurrection and the new life that isn't just Jesus new life but is yours as well these are the sort of things that any pastor might say and their generalizations because I don't know this person who's asked the question but whether it's been five minutes since you drifted away or five or fifty years since you drifted away that there is a way back one of the first child's choruses that I learned when I was very young there's a way back to God from the dark parts of sin there's a door that is open and you may go in that Calvary's cross is where you begin when you come as a sinner to Jesus that is as true now as it was when I first sang it oh maybe sixty years ago now but out of that there is that great wisdom in the gospels and the Lord's prayer well I do hope that this has been a helpful time for those who've been watching thank you very

much for joining us on this live stream questions have come in from all over the world and of course this will remain up on these facebook pages where we've been posting this and of course you can send other people to go and watch and do feel free to ask more questions by actually getting in touch via the podcast that's ask ntwrite.com if you go there you can subscribe to the podcast you can also register for the newsletter which also gets you access to actually asking questions on the show so do make sure to do that if you like more of the same sort of thing Tom it's been so good spending some time with you thank you for the time I did say earlier on it would be lovely if you would close our time in prayer obviously we're all thinking about lots of things coronavirus the pandemic but also these recent events in the USA and it may be those for whom they're watching and they're not necessarily wouldn't call themselves Jesus followers at this point in time facebook is a very wide open space where many people may be just you know coming along and seeing what's going on and and if there's something you could pray for those who may be have have sent something of what this Christian life might be about it would be great to to include that as well yeah and let me just give a little shout out to my colleagues at SBCK and Zondevan absolutely have rushed out this little book God and the pandemic in breakneck speed I don't think I've ever known a book get published so quickly and bless them they've worked very hard on it so thank you to them and I hope that that will be a blessing to many so let's then just draw this together in a prayer gracious heavenly Father you have made us in your image and you've called us to love you to follow you to serve you you have revealed yourself to us in the Lord Jesus in his life and his death and his resurrection and his ascension you have promised us the gift of the spirit to live within us Father we claim all these things now as we're in a mess we're in a mess about this disease which is taking over so much and which has destroyed lives and ruining lives and making things a misery even for those who aren't themselves infected as yet we pray for the doctors and nurses we pray for those who are dying and for those who grieve over those who have gone we pray that you will soon make a way through whether through vaccine or whatever and make a way for us to resume some sort of normal life and Father please teach us teach your church teach your world how to be in the time after this pandemic how not to forget any lessons that you want us to learn but we pray too for the great country of the United States of America which suddenly has gone into this terrible convulsion as happens from time to time that we grieve over it nonetheless we pray for those directly affected those who feel that their own lives may be threatened and those who feel just puzzled and confused we pray for peace and healing and love and for the churches to find ways of setting the example that the world needs of what it means to live together as family and to love one another as brothers and sisters gracious Father that is a great country we pray that it will have a great future coming around this corner and out into a new day and we pray Father for any who are watching listening who are not sure who are on the edge who are thinking about Jesus thinking about faith thinking about who they are and who you might want them to be even assuming they can guess who you might be gracious Lord open their eyes open their hearts may the gospel do its work in their hearts and minds and may

they sense and feel and know and respond to your love which is shown in the death of Jesus so Father may your blessing be upon us so Lord Jesus may your blessing be upon us so Holy Spirit may your blessing be a prompt upon us may we be faithful to your calling and fruitful in your for your kingdom and cheerful in your service we pray at all in Jesus name Amen Amen Amen Tom thank you so much we've really valued spending some time with you this evening I know that lockdown is still a busy time for you and but I know that we're getting lots of appreciative comments coming in via Facebook for tonight's event really do appreciate it all the very best we hope to catch up with you before too long yes indeed thank you for setting all this up and forgetting all the technology right etc and great to be with you and greetings to all out there good night great stuff thank you very much and thank you for watching if you've been tracking along again it'll all be available here on Facebook and of course via the podcast I'll just mention the link one more time askntwrite.com if you want to subscribe to the podcast in the newsletter and we'll make sure there are links as well to Tom's book and some of the other resources we've mentioned this evening but for now thank you very much have a good evening and see you later thank you bye bye 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 podcasts from premiere visit premiere.org.uk/podcast

[Music]