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#159 What difference does prayer make? Tom shares his prayer habits

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom answers listener questions on prayer including: 'Is prayer just telling God what to do?' and 'What difference does prayer make if God has already decided what to do?'. Kelly is nervous about praying out loud before a meal in public, and Jennifer is questioning the legitimacy of public displays of prayer in the USA. Tom responds to these questions and shares his own habits of prayer, including keeping a prayer diary.

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Transcript

Hello there, before we leap into today's show I want to share a powerful free resource with you. We often hear from listeners looking for answers to share with a friend or loved one who claims God can't exist for a variety of scientific reasons, but science actually supports the existence of God which is why I want to offer you a free download called "God's not dead". It explores scientifically how our own cosmos points to a creator in three clear areas.

Again, this powerful resource is yours absolutely free. So download "God's not dead" for

free right now at premierinsight.org/resources. That's premierinsight.org/resources. Today's episode is sponsored by BetterHelp. On Ask Nt right anything, we see great value in finding answers to some of life's big questions and just like with Professor Nt right, sometimes we all need help in finding those answers.

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That's betterhelp.com/askntright. Hello there, welcome back. I'm Justin Briley, head of theology and apologetics at Premier Unbelievable, bringing you the weekly Ask Nt right anything show, part of our suite of podcasts and videos from premierunbelievable.com. Register there for our newsletter, gets you bonus content and the link of course to ask Tom a question yourself.

We do it all in partnership with Nt right online and SBCK, Tom's UK publisher. Well today, Tom is answering listener questions on prayer, including "Is prayer just telling God what to do?" and "What difference does prayer make if God's already decided what to do?" He's nervous about praying out loud before meals in public and Jennifer is questioning the legitimacy of public displays of prayer in the US. Well Tom responds to those questions and shares his own habits of prayer, including keeping a prayer diary.

Thanks to Matt, who got in touch to say that the podcast continues to deepen his biblical understanding. In fact, this is a second review from Matt of the podcast. He says still listening and still learning after three or more years.

I feel a special affinity as I was a student at the same time as Nt right, but at the other ancient university. I assume you're talking about Cambridge in that case, Matt. Thank you so much.

And if you can leave a rating and a review with your podcast provider, it does help others to discover the show, to discover Tom's thought and theology. For now, on to your questions. Welcome back, we've got prayers.

That's what we're talking about on the show today. And Tom is someone who regularly talks about prayer, writes on prayer and praise as well, which is the important thing. And we've got your questions, both sort of theological questions and practical questions about prayer.

So let's dive right in, Tom. Andrew from Andover in Minnesota, USA wants to ask a fairly sort of central basic question, which is simply what's the point of prayer? Most of the prayers that I hear at church either consist of sermon etch trying to make specific doctrinal points or of statements about the goodness of the church, its members or the

speaker. Alternatively, prayer often seems like we're telling God what we want him to do to stop evil, eradicate poverty, et cetera.

Many times we then bargain with God. If you do X, then I will do why. I'm becoming increasingly uncomfortable with this pattern.

And I was wondering, in your opinion, what the purpose of prayer is and how we should structure our prayers? What do you think, Tom? Yeah. Yeah. This is a hugely important issue.

And we've got other questions related to it as well. I really do want to say something basic theological, the basic theological level. Right from the beginning in Genesis one, God creates the world in such a way that his image bearing creatures, humans, men and women and children, will have real agency within it.

God is, if you like, a power sharing God. He wants to work through human beings. I think that is deeply Christological, as we say in the trade.

In other words, I think God made humans in his own image to have agency within his world so that he might himself become human in order to become the Lord of the world and come to be at home with us in his world. So that it seems to me until we understand that pattern, we're not really getting to square one because people often say, well, God is sovereign. So why should I bother praying or why should I bother doing anything actually if God's going to do it all? And that way, danger lies, there are all sorts of philosophical puzzles about that.

In fact, I'll tell a little story. At lunch table the other day with my grandchildren, my six-year-old had got a question he was burning to ask and he said, grandfather, if God does everything, why do we have to do anything at all? And I took a deep breath and as I was waiting for some wise word to say to a six-year-old, my ten-year-old granddaughter looked up from the book she was reading and said, the illusion of free will and dived straight back into her book again. And we all sort of collapsed laughing.

This sort of world-weary puzzled junior philosopher, oh yeah, we've heard all that before. So that always associates that moment with this question. And my answer was that it's like imagine a musical composer who is a great composer but has a daughter who is a brilliant violinist and he writes a concerto for her to play.

When she plays that concerto, she is playing it but it was all his idea and without him putting it up in the context and all the genetic stuff that he'd passed on to her, she wouldn't have been able to do it but there is a sense of delight on both sides. And I think that that's one small image of what's going on, that God makes his world in such a way that humans have agency within it. And again and again in Scripture, we see how that works out.

And Israel is called to be God's partner. In fact, Jacob gets the name Israel after he's spent a night wrestling with God. And that wrestling is an image that many people have taken up in prayer and said that's what prayer is all about.

Now of course, because we know that prayer is important, then when people pray during church services, there is a sense, yeah, this is what we ought to be doing. And day by day, week by week, we pray for peace in the world, we pray for justice, we pray for our rulers, we pray for statesmen and stateswomen around the world that they may act wisely, etc. And from week to week and day to day, we don't see much change in answer to those, but my goodness, if the whole church stopped praying like that, I dread to think what might happen as a result.

And of course, as Andrew from Andover says, sometimes people making prayers in church do actually rehearse doctrinal points and they become like little sermons. And that's a bit weird. There are different traditions of how you pray in public, why in my tradition, the Anglican tradition, we have these rather short prayers.

We call "collects" where you remind God of some aspect of his character, you lay before him one quite short, simple thing about what's going on in our world or in our lives, and then you ask him to do something about it. There's basically three sentences and you're in and out. And there's a sort of a whir, a wholeness about that rather than having to ramble on and on and on, which Jesus indeed warned us against it.

And as for bargaining with God, obviously there are passages in the Bible where people actually do that back to Jacob again. He says, "If God will be with me and if he will bring me back to this place, then God will be my God." Now, of course, God knows another trick or two and he comes around the back and he's actually totally in charge and Jacob gets completely messed up by his uncle, etc, etc. But God does bring him back.

And it's as though God says, "All right, Jacob, if that's where you are, that's where we'll start, but watch out because I'm actually going to do it quite differently from what you'd imagined." And so then I think as we grow up in faith, we have to learn to structure our prayers and order our prayers, remembering that it is a mystery, but by God's spirit, and it is part of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit enabling us to join in the triune conversation of Father, Son, and Spirit about what God is doing and ultimately will do in the world. That takes us back to Romans 8, which is, of course, one of my all-time favorite passages. But I think it's hugely important.

And so Genesis 1 and Psalm 8, "The dignity of humans is to be given under God responsibility for bits of the world, starting with ourselves and our own immediate lives, but then stretching right out." And prayer is saying, "Okay, we hold that bit of the world or the world as a whole up before God and cry for mercy and justice and peace." And that is part of what it means to be human. Another question very related and actually evoking your six-year-old grandson's question that is in a table. This is David in the US

who wants to know what difference does prayer make if God's already decided what to do.

And specifically uses the word here, "If God is immutable and sovereign, what is the practical effects of our prayers of supplication, while the Bible has passages that encourage us to pray for specific requests, I struggle with understanding why. If God is going to do what He wills and He cannot be changed, what difference do our requests make? We all have heard experiences where we either don't get what we'd asked for or we do get the things we never prayed for. So it all seems a bit arbitrary or a bit harsher, pointless in the end.

Okay, thoughts on that one? I can see that feeling, but I have to challenge right at the beginning, where does this immutability idea come from? These are classical ideas about God which come actually from the classical pagan world from people like Aristotle and many theologians, many Christians have started off with those big ideas of God as the complete immutable one, etc. Then you notice that such theologians find it very difficult to fit Jesus into the picture and they have as it were a split trinity where you've got this big immutable God. Then you've got Jesus who's a man going around chatting to people and sometimes those people disappoint Jesus.

Jesus looked at the rich young ruler as he went away and Jesus loved him and was sad that he'd gone away. We have the Jesus who wept at the tomb of his friend even though he knew he was going to raise him from the dead. And particularly we have the Jesus who wept and prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane and asked that maybe there might be another way to work out the great plan and the answer was no.

In fact, that is the one moment when Jesus calls God Abba, which people have held up as this is Jesus' great Abba experience. Well, yes, it seems to be Abba, this intimate word for a father, but the one time Jesus prayed that prayer, his Abba father said, actually no. And Jesus had to say, not my will, but yours.

I think until we have inhabited scenes like that and wrestled with them, we should be very wary of using language about immutability and so on. I think God does know what God intends to do, but I think as people have often said, it's more like a master chess player. I think this is another C.S. Lewis image where the master chess player can see perfectly well how to win the game.

And then the novice on the other side of the board makes a surprising move, a stupid or unexpected move. And the master chess player thinks, hmm, well, I wasn't expecting you to play that, but now that you've done that, then I will, of course, do this and this and this. And the thing still works out.

And we see this in scripture when God says, I have to destroy the people and Moses comes and beats on his door and says, absolutely not. They're your people and it's your

reputation is on the line. And God says, yeah, you're right, actually.

And we'll find another way. The prophet Amos as well. Lord, how can Jacob stand? He is so small.

And the Lord relents and says, OK, we won't do it that way. Now, you could say that that was a kind of clever way of God revealing to Moses or Amos and what he actually wanted to do by warning about a possible consequence. But on the face of the text, it looks as though there is a real desire on God's part to do A and then somebody comes and prays urgently and God says, yeah, OK, we'll do B instead.

And I think we often have that sense ourselves. So beware of these big philosophical categories like immutability because actually when we know the triune God and put Jesus in the middle of that picture and then pray for the spirit in dwellers as well, things may actually be much more fluid and flexible and open-ended than we had imagined. Perhaps you've noticed that culture is becoming increasingly antagonistic to Christian faith, especially in the public square.

And as Christians, you and I can struggle with how to live out our faith in a society that is so hostile to it. That's why John Lennox's incredibly relevant book, *Against the Flow*, is truly a work for our times. It explores the story of Daniel and how four Hebrew boys maintain their faith in an age of relativism.

I'm excited to say that this month, *Against the Flow* is our special thanks to you for your gift to help keep this program and so many other resources coming to you with brilliant content from apologists like John Lennox. It's true that this program is only made possible by the generosity of listeners like you. So I encourage you to give by going to premierinsight.org/NTRight. That's premierinsight.org/NTRight. And please do remember to request your copy of *Against the Flow*.

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Discover your potential with BetterHelp. Visit betterhelp.com/AskNTRight today to get 10% off your first month. That's betterhelp.com/AskNTRight. God has created us in

a world where there is agency, where our prayers impact what happens and impacts what God will ultimately do and how the pieces all fit together.

But it is also a great mystery. We're not claiming that there's any easy answers to these big philosophical questions. There's a passage towards the end of the book of Daniel where Daniel has been praying and praying and the angel who comes to answer him says, "We were actually listening from the moment you started praying but I had something else to do first," which is a lovely sort of anthropomorphic thing.

"I had a battle to fight, so sorry, we put you off. Now I've dealt with that, I'm going to come and deal with you," like somebody in an office who says, "You are number 19, you're a Q, and we've dealt with those 10% now it's your turn." I think that is how it often seems and there's no shame about that. As part of the mystery of being made in the image of God, made to share God's work in the world.

Don't collapse back into the immutability. God is more like Jesus than we usually imagine. Let's put it like that.

Lovely. Kelly in the USA has a very practical question. Says, "Hi Tom and Justin, I was wondering if a prayer before meals is a practice required in the Bible and is it okay that I'm rather insecure about praying in public? I prefer a quick pause of gratitude rather than a whole prayer, especially in a restaurant.

I would love to hear your thoughts. What's your practice on this Tom? Do you tend to sort of pray when you're out and about in a restaurant before you begin a meal with friends and so on?" It varies enormously according to where we are, who we're with, etc. If we're having a restaurant meal with Christian friends, it would be quite normal these days for somebody to say, "Senseur, would you like to pray before we start?" And I should say to an American, normally our restaurant prayers are much shorter than yours.

I've been prayed with in American restaurants where by the time you've finished, you're worried that the food is going cold or the waitress is standing there with arms folded. You guys are going to finish. I've got some stuff to give you.

And so I think there is sort of moderation in all things. And basically no, prayer before meals isn't a practice required in the Bible, but the assumption throughout the Bible is that again, as human beings living in God's world, we are grateful for what we're given. Paul talks about nothing is unclean in itself, anything is okay if it is received with gratitude.

Now he doesn't say, if you say a prayer before the meal, that's Romans 14, by the way, but there is a sense that that would be appropriate, and there are plenty of prayers, particularly in the Psalms, the eyes of all, wait upon you, oh Lord, and you give them food and do season. That is woven into the graces before meals in many of the Oxford

colleges from where I'm speaking from. So that's quite appropriate, but I think when Kelly says, I would prefer a quick pause of gratitude, yes, sometimes it can be embarrassing if somebody goes on and on, it can be a bit showy.

And basically saying, let's just pause and say our own prayers. That's perfectly okay. And different families will do it differently according to who is at the table, according to their traditions and so on.

And there are different human emotional styles as well. Some people are naturally loud extroverts who love to pray out loud and enjoy that. When my kids were little, we had a sung grace which we used to sing together and ended ending up in a sort of harmonic arm and at the end.

And when they were like sort of 10, 8, 7, and 3 or whatever they were, we used to sing that in restaurants with great amusement and smiles all round and people would sort of look and laugh. Then when they just got slightly older, and I would say, should we sing grace? Oh, dad, no, that's so embarrassing. No, we're not going to do that.

So I think we go through seasons and we have to be wise and go with the flow. Obviously, the grateful heart is the key thing, not the showy out thing, but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't ever pray. But I would keep it short.

The meal is waiting. Going from public prayer in a restaurant, perhaps before a meal, to a different sort of public prayer. Jennifer from Tennessee in the USA, I'll read the whole question.

It's rather long, but it's I think it's quite a specific issue for the US especially. Says I listen to the podcast all the time, have been so helped by the conversations. My question is about public prayer.

What are your thoughts on large public displays of prayer, such as organized gatherings outside schools to publicly pray for students? I do pray for my kids and their school and teachers and other students, but I don't feel the need to join in a public demonstration of prayer. In fact, I'm uncomfortable with the way these kinds of acts seem to disregard how Jesus tended to pray, often alone or with his disciples. And to pull out a line of scripture, go against Jesus' clear instruction to pray privately in Matthew 6 verse 6. These public prayer displays often come across more as acts in the culture war here in my American context.

Even though I think they're often well-intentioned, I feel at some level like they're meant to manipulate people, whether the people praying or those prayed for through a protest or spectacle kind of format. Also, I wonder if in Matthew 6 verse 6 Jesus advised his disciples to pray in private because we are all prone to become prideful from the very public displays of charity like this kind of prayer. Am I being too cynical, interested in

your thoughts? Where would you go with this, Tom? I think the question, am I being too cynical is probably the right question.

I'm not sure you're being too cynical, Jennifer, but I think there is a proper caution there. And yes, this is very much an American question. I wouldn't expect this question to come from somebody in other parts of the English-speaking world, let alone other European countries.

This is not an issue. In America, it's obviously an issue because you've got a major church state split, which is awkward because it doesn't actually quite work. And I think most people in America who think about these things know it doesn't quite work.

However, the secularists are very keen to keep public prayer out of public schools, particularly for whatever reason, but it goes way back in the American tradition of the separation of church and state. In my country, I grew up in a world where it was a requirement by law that schools had to have a public act of worship. And that was often honored in the breach rather than the observance, but it was school assemblies.

Now, these days in Britain, school assemblies have often become totally secular, but the schools that I went to through the 50s and 60s always started with a public act of worship, even if it was just a brief thing, maybe two verses of a hymn and a short prayer. Maybe we said the Lord's prayer, and then we went about the business of the day. But that was just the norm.

It would have been unthinkable in America, of course. So yes, then, the public prayer outside school gates or whatever can indeed be an act of protest against the secularization. And that's a particular battle which my American friends have got to fight and understand their own context.

And I suspect it will vary from say the deep south to the Midwest to whatever as well, and the northeast, different things will be acceptable or not. But I think something that you said early on in that question which really struck me, that Jesus, of course, prayed often alone, and then he told his disciples to go into your room and pray to the Father in secret. And I think that's the basis that the secret personal prayer is the heart of it.

But of course then, in the assembly of God's people in church or in quasi church settings, it's normal and right that we pray together and so on. Transposing that to public situations can be a sort of protest, can be making a point. There was a time I remember I was part of an Anglican commission, and we were meeting in Alexandria, Virginia, and it was at a time when the Middle East was in great crisis, and there was a meeting at the State Department in Washington of Israelis and Palestinians, meeting with American leaders to try to thrash things out.

And a bunch of us went from our meeting and we stood outside the State Department. It

was December, it was jolly cold, and we read Isaiah 40 in English, in Hebrew, and in Arabic, and just prayed for peace. And we rather hoped that somebody would come and arrest us or something for disturbing the public peace.

Unfortunately, they didn't. They came in and invited us for a cup of hot chocolate, which wasn't quite what we'd imagined. But so I mean, I think wisely, and perhaps with a sense of humor, and just as a way of saying, we want to show some kind of solidarity here, there are times when you can do things like that.

But I would be aware of it becoming then, as you say, taken over by being a political act. And in America, at the moment, I know this is a very tense and difficult time with certain sort of Christian nationalism going on. And some people seeing public prayer as being one of the key issues along with certain other hot button issues, which you've jolly or got to fight for.

And I would say, please lighten up those of us who pray for you and love you would love to see a wiser, more mature Christianity blossoming in America, as indeed in our own highly secularized and very muddled country. I'm not saying we've got it right and you've got it wrong. We could probably do with a bit more public prayer ourselves.

But I do think there needs to be a sensitivity to what the larger issues. So I wouldn't say you're being too cynical, Jennifer. I think you're being sensitive to larger issues.

And as you pray for the people involved in these things, that needs to be taken very clearly into account. Yeah. Yeah.

And that's that's really helpful. Thank you, Tom. Just just one final one will squeeze in Deidre and Dublin wants to know about your own personal prayer practices.

Tom mentioned in a previous podcast that he keeps a prayer diary where he lists people he prays for. This may seem a little trivial, but could Tom explain how he uses his own diary as part of his prayer life? I found it hard to manage those lists and would really like some help. Any thoughts for Deidre? Yeah.

Lists need revising from time to time. And I'm actually in the process of revising lists I've used for a long time. My normal morning prayer routine follows quite closely the old Anglican Book of Common Prayer morning prayer, but with the Bible readings expanded because I have my own lists at my own schedule of readings, which takes me through the Old Testament and the New Testament on a pretty regular basis.

So it's like morning prayer, but with a lot more and deeper Bible than you'd get in an ordinary morning prayer service. But the morning prayer, having paid attention to scripture, then moves into a time of prayer after you say the creed and the prayer starts with the Lord's prayer and then goes out through the collect of the day and then out into the wider world. And that's the point where the prayer diary would come out.

And for me, I have a little notebook and there are in the front prayers that I pray every day. There are certain people like my wife and my family, for instance, for whom I pray every day without fail and certain other key friends or key situations or key issues that are burning on my heart. And I need to be reminded every day that needs to be prayed for.

That list tends to get longer. It's hard to drop things off that list, though sometimes you have to just for common sense. Then it goes into Monday with members of the family, friends, world issues, governmental issues, issues of peace and justice, etc, etc.

and particularly painful situations. And then Tuesday, more family, more friends, etc, etc. And on through till Saturday and then Sunday will be organized differently.

So I've worked with that for many years and it changes a bit this way and that. And sometimes I'm surprised that I'm still praying for these people that haven't heard from them for years. And sometimes that nudges me then to send them an email and say, "Hi, I was actually praying for you this morning.

How are you? What's going on?" People sometimes do that to me, which is lovely. I appreciate that. Sometimes prayerfully, one says, "Actually, this person is now somebody else's responsibility.

I happily have had this person over to be prayed for by other people." So there is a danger otherwise of it becoming legalistic that I've got to mention everybody all the time. But the answer I think God probably does want us to come before him with all sorts of people and issues on our hearts. And so keeping a quite simple diary like that is one way that I've been able to do it.

Lots of people don't like organizing their lives that way. That's absolutely fine. There is no one size fits all.

But find something that really does help and that really does remind you of who you actually want to be reminded of when you're praying. Well, thank you. That's really, really helpful, Tom.

Very practical. And I'm sure a lot of people will have been challenged in their own prayer lives to think about how they could pray regularly, faithfully for those around them. Thank you for all the questions.

I hope they've been helpful. God bless you, Tom. And I look forward to catching up with you again next time on the show.

Yes, indeed. Thank you very much. Well, thank you for being with us for today's show.

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more from our shows and podcasts, do just register at premierunbelievable.com. You'll get our ebook as well thrown in Googling God. It answers the top five most googled questions about faith, including how can I know that God is real and how can I know why we suffer? That's yours as a bonus ebook when you register at premierunbelievable.com and the link is with today's podcast. Next time, we're back with more of your questions on why bother improving the world and can Christians attain perfection.

But for now, God bless. See you soon. [Pause]