OpenTheo

#62 Facebook has questions - New creation, souls in heaven and Torah

April 22, 2021



Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

In a special episode Tom answers questions sent in by members of the NT Wright discussion group on Facebook about heaven, souls and Torah. Tom and Justin also look ahead to 2 special events: Tom's forthcoming Big Conversation with Douglas Murray on 13th May and Unbelievable? The Conference on 15th May Book for the Unbelievable? & Ask NT Wright Anything conference on Sat 15 May Support the show and receive a free book – give from the USA or Rest of the world For bonus content, the newsletter, prize draws and to ask a question sign up at www.askntwright.com Exclusive podcast offers on Tom's books and videos from SPCK & NT Wright Online Subscribe to the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast via your preferred podcast platform

Transcript

We're going to begin today's podcast - I want to share an incredibly special resource with you today. If you're like me, life can get pretty hectic pretty quickly, but one thing that helps me slow down is connecting with God in new ways. And I'd like to share a resource that has really helped me do that.

It's called Five Ways to Connect with God. And you can download it for free right now at premiereinsight.org/resources. I think you'll find refreshment for your soul. So go right now to premiereinsight.org/resources and download your copy.

That's premiereinsight.org/resources.

[Music] The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

[Music] Well hello and welcome back to the show. I'm Justin Briley, premier's theology and apologetics editor.

And today's show brought to you as ever by premiere SBCK and NT Wright online. And a

very special edition of the show today because we're looking at questions that have actually been sent in by members of the NT Wright discussion group on Facebook, especially dealing with issues like the stages after death, being with Christ and you have a new earth. Other related issues as well.

So looking forward to bringing you some of those in a part one and we'll have a part two episode next week as well. Tom, as you may know, if you're a listener to this podcast, is a renowned Bible scholar, senior research fellow at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, and has published many, many books. And I'm really excited, not only that Tom is going to be at Unbelievable for Conference 2021 on Saturday the 15th of May, all online, you can book a place anywhere in the world, Unbelievable.live and see all the other speakers and content and sessions that are going to be part of that.

But not only that, we can confirm as of today, as of today's podcast, that Tom is going to be doing a sort of curtain razor conversation, couple of days ahead of the conference with Douglas Murray, very well known, sometimes controversial public thinker and journalist. It's going to be a live stream conversation between Tom, Douglas Murray, and myself, which you can be part of. You can watch live on Thursday the 13th of May.

That's at 8pm UK and that'll be what all about 3pm Eastern, 12 noon on the West Coast. OK, look out for the links in the info with today's show where you can find out more about that live streamed conversation. Really looking forward to that two massively interesting thinkers coming together for the first time.

That's what I love to do with my Unbelievable show. This is going to be part of our big conversation series from Unbelievable. Check the details for that, how to watch it live at the big conversation dot show.

So that's Thursday the 13th of May, 8pm UK, 3pm Eastern, 12 noon on the West Coast. And do get yourself booked in as well for Unbelievable, the conference 2021. Unbelievable.live to book your place.

Really excited being able to bring both Tom Holland and Ennti right together for that particular edition. And some brilliant speakers also joining us for the day. Claire Williams, Sean and Josh McDowell are be co-hosting with Ruth Jackson, so all of the links with today's show.

And you can find out more about the show further videos, how to ask a question yourself and all our other resources by registering at the show page askentiright.com. You can support the show from there too. And if you're listening from the States, we'd love for you to do that over at premyinsight.org and click on Ask Entiright. That's enough from me and let's get into today's show.

Well Tom, it's so lovely to be joined by you again for another edition of the show. Now

tell me, have you had all your jabs yet yourself? Yes, actually. I had the second jab last Saturday, which from where we're now recording that I guess four days ago.

And as the first time I felt a bit odd later that day, but I slept it off and that's been fine. Good stuff, good stuff. We're hoping very much to bring you in person because of that to our unbelievable conference on Saturday the 15th of May with Tom Holland, who's also, I'm glad to say, been doubly vaccinated.

That's partly because he has a wife who works in medicine. But yeah, I am just so looking forward to, and I know that many people who have booked in so far, Tom, are really looking forward to this unbelievable conference, particularly the fact that both you and Tom Holland will be speaking and sitting down together to have a conversation. Right.

What have you heard generally about, Tom? I know you've been on my show before to talk to him, but what's been your overall sense of what he's been doing and saying and writing? I mean, his monumental historical books are fascinating. I haven't read them all. Like I doubt if he's read all my books, but we try to catch up.

And he has this sense of the big picture of certainly Western history, perhaps global history. And in the middle of that, his sense of what Christianity was at the beginning and has become and has gone on being is fascinating from his historical point of view. And it isn't a whitewash.

It isn't saying, "Oh, look, Christianity is marvelous, et cetera." It always has been. There's lots of problems, but he has a strong sense that what Christianity has, as it were, brought to the table in terms of world history is something which hadn't been seen before and has at least the potential, if not always the actuality, to make all the great difference that we all know is needed. And I find that fascinating in all sorts of ways.

Yeah. And I think that has gone alongside, and I think he's been quite open talking about this with me. And in fact, he's coming on a future edition of Unbelievable Shortly where he talks about this, his own personal journey alongside that, as well as the intellectual journey.

There's definitely been an opening up, I think, of the sense that he has that this begins to make sense at a bigger level for him. But yes, it's interesting and I'm sure fascinating stuff on the day when we are looking at this theme for the Unbelievable Conference, "How to Tell the Greatest Story Ever Told" and "Unbelievable.Live". If you've been listening to this podcast for any time, then you'll already know that that's the place to go to book your place, but Saturday the 15th of May is when it's all happening. And rather exciting, we've got something of a curtain razor to the conference just a couple of days before.

But Thursday the 13th of May, we're doing a live stream conversation between yourself and Douglas Murray, who's a well-known public thinker, the social editor of the spectator. And yeah, I think this is the first time you've probably spoken with Douglas Murray. Would that be right, Tom? That will be the case.

Yes. I only know him through his journalism and I haven't read very much of that either. I haven't read any book by him yet.

I hope to before then, if there's time. But he is a provocative writer and thinker and as you will know, three or four weeks ago, he wrote a piece in the spectator, which I thought was from one point of view far enough and from another point of view missing the point, as it were. And he wrote a letter to the spectator which they published in full, I'm happy to say, engaging with him.

And maybe our conversation will take off from there. It may well do. That was the issue of the way the church is handling issues around race and so on.

I thought your response was absolutely super. I saw it shared a great deal actually on my social media. Oh, right.

Okay. Okay. I think printed in the spectator.

Yes. But yeah, I think that may be a well be one issue that comes up. But I think what we're planning to talk about primarily is the idea of identity, myth, miracles, and really whether the Christian narrative that once guided the West has been lost and what it might be replaced with and what we're missing in the process.

What's interesting is when I've spoken to Douglas in the past, he's described himself as a Christian atheist, i.e. he would love it to be true because he sort of understands the need for that kind of a narrative. And it's interesting that I think we're seeing almost in our culture that new atheism becoming rather old hat actually and people realizing, sure, what do you replace it if you get rid of God, what replaces that narrative people can't live in a vacuum in that sense. Right.

Right. And postmodernity has tried to live in a vacuum. And what happens is that trivia, social media, Twitter, but just general play either play in the sense of doing trivia to pass the time or play in the sense of trying to reinvent the world around yourself, whatever.

And these come in to take over and they can be very, very destructive and I think politically we've seen that and certainly personally and as a pastor I see that with people. Yeah, well we'll be asking the question, do we need, well, can we live without the Christian narrative essentially is what we'll be looking at in that program it's going to be a fascinating one. By the time this podcast is available, hopefully we'll have a link where people can register their interest and make sure they're there for that but it'll be available on this podcast we're going to be making sure it goes out to anyone who

listens to this podcast it will be available on the unbelievable podcast.

But you can join us on the night, Thursday the 13th of May via YouTube via our Facebook pages and so on, and just check, check the details to make sure you know how to be with us but very much looking forward to that conversation between yourself and Douglas, Tom. Let's get into today's edition of the podcast. Now I didn't don't know whether you ever go on Facebook, Tom, my suspicion is probably not.

Nope, correct. You've got other people who manage I know your Facebook presence when it comes to your published articles and things. However, there are a great deal of people on Facebook who do enjoy your material and that includes members of the NT rights discussion group on Facebook which believe it or not that group has 12,000 members on it.

And I don't know how active all of them are, but but certainly I'm part of it and there's lots of it. There's always every day there's new questions being asked people asking what do you think Tom would think about such and such or this or that. I frequently post our podcasts into there so people know of that.

I believe a good number of them are coming to the conference as well, which is great. Now, I just want to say a shout out to Luther Cabin, who's the group moderator who is a great fan of your work, Tom, and has kindly harvested some questions from the group which we're using on today's podcast. So that's what we're doing.

We're asking specifically questions that have come in from members of the NT right discussion group on Facebook. Now, these are only a few of the many that were submitted. So we'll do what we can with these just before we get into some of the proper questions.

A lovely message here from Michael Robert Miller, who said this is a comment really said if Dr. writers to read this, I'd just like to say thank you for being so faithful. Staying the course, even when others opposed you, I earned an M. Div from seminary, but Christianity never made so much sense as it has since I've been studying your books, especially surprised by hope and the Christian origin series. Thank you.

I hope to have a cup of tea with you in God's new wealth. That's great. Let's drink to that.

Wonderful. You've got a cup of tea with you right now. And Norm Leach.

This is just a fun comment. Why didn't you name the New Testament in its world, getting the NT right with NT right instead? I'm sure you've heard things like that before, Tom. I think ever since I was about five at my primary school, my surname has generated obvious puns.

My favorite moment with my own surname was once I got on a plane going to Toronto from London. And the last minute, a Japanese gentleman came and sat down beside me, just here as it were, and he spoke no English, but he was sorting out his documents and I could see on his passport that his surname was spelled R-O-N-G. And so because he had no English, I couldn't explain to him that I had Mr. Wrong on my right and he had Mr. Right on his left.

That was just eight hours of frustration of not being able to share this gentleman. I love it. Before we get, I'm sorry to be taken the time with these little details, Tom.

But why have you chosen in the end to go with Tom as it were? It's just a published name. Yeah. I'm Chris and Nicholas Thomas.

There are lots of Nicholas rights in my family. My father was a cousin, etc. And Thomas shortened almost always to Tom was my other grandfather's name, my mother's father's name.

And so from early childhood, I was just called Tom. However, it gets confusing because in library catalogs and so on, they like to have the full name. So you often have it on the inside title page, full name, Nicholas Thomas Right, copyright or whatever.

American publishers often prefer to have the full initials, NT. The British publishers decided to go with Tom for popular books and NT for academic books. And so this has generated the urban myth that there are actually two of us, but really there aren't.

It's just me. That would be quite funny if there was two NT rights floating around, one who just speaks at the popular level, the other who's the academic. Anyway, confusion aside, let's go to some of these questions from the members of the discussion group.

Sarah Van Rynn, and I know Sarah a little bit actually myself, but Sarah says I'm a mom and teacher, grade five and six. We're trying to answer the question in my class at a Christian school. Are there two heavens? Now, I replied that I think of heaven as two stages.

One, a paradise slash mansion Jesus is making for us. And two, a new heavens, a new earth initiated when Christ comes back. Now, is that how you would describe heaven to 10 to 11 year olds? And as a side note, Sarah adds, we had a lovely discussion afterwards about how God might redeem this earth, including how he might redeem soccer, school students mentioned no tests and jobs.

Anyway, go ahead, Tom, go ahead. Wonderful. I mean, yeah, I think it's great to get people from an early age thinking about a redeemed new earth joined with a new heaven, rather than leaving all this behind and going to this odd place called heaven, which has become less and less credible as this last century or so has worn on.

People use just to think about going up to be in the sky or into this kind of ethereal world. Basically a Platonist view, which is still very popular in some quarters and indeed is enjoying something of a revival at the moment with some theologians. But I want to say to Sarah, we do need to talk about two stages.

The funny thing is that the Bible doesn't use the word heaven to describe either of those stages. Jesus talks about, as she says, in my father's house, so many rooms, the word mansions doesn't catch it. That sounds like big fashionable houses outside the west end of a town or city.

It's not that sort of a word. It's a place where you go to rest and be refreshed, which is rather like paradise, as Jesus says to the person being crucified beside him. Today you will be with me in paradise.

Paradise is a blissful waiting place. You could call that heaven if you like, but I'm just alerted to the fact that the Bible doesn't use the word heaven for that. Likewise, the final destination.

If we say that that's heaven, well, we can say that if we like, but again, that's not how Scripture describes it. Scripture describes it in terms of the new creation, the time when God is all in all, the time when there will be no tears. I had a student who had young children was trying to explain to them that this will be a place where there are no tears.

And four, five, six-year-olds understand the idea of a place where there will be no tears. And this little girl, Blessa, used to say, "Daddy, when we get to the no tears place." And I think we need to try all the different ways in to say this. The two stages are basically in Scripture.

Jesus talks about being with him, that passage in Luke 23. Paul talks similarly about going to be with the Messiah in 2 Corinthians 5 and in Philippians 1. And there's a sense of that's the only thing that really matters. Don't think about a place where Jesus happens to be.

Think about being with Jesus and whatever sort of place or existence that is, the really important thing is being with Jesus. And then, then there is the new creation, an entire new world like the present one only more so, full of life and vigor and energy and possibility and projects and so on. In which God himself, the Father and the Son, will be personally present.

It's hard to describe that. So we have to use picture language, which is what the Bible does. But that's the thing.

God giving us this place where He will come and be with us. So we go to be with Jesus and then at the end, God, Father and Son come to be with us. And we of course are indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

So it is a Trinitarian vision. Hard to say all that to a 10 or 11 year old, but you've got to start somewhere. And that's what we're working towards all the time.

Absolutely. There was another question here and it rather ties in. It's sort of, yes, okay, I get that, but here's the problem.

So Dave Craigie asks, I was trying to explain to someone how the disembodied soul idea was more Plato than Bible, exactly as you say, Tom. However, the question then arose about the post-death, but pre-resurrection state of believers, again, which you've described, e.g., the thief on the cross, this paradise sort of idea. How do these ideas fit together? If it is possible, in that sense, to consciously be with Christ without having a disembodied soul or spirit.

So, as I said, point being, is this kind of midway place? Is that a disembodied state? And if so, surely then there is something to Plato's idea that we can exist in a sort of disembodied soul type state. We need to distinguish for Plato and for the Christian, Plato, and his tradition, which as I say is still very strong today, the idea of the soul is of an immortal soul which pre-existed its present embodiment in our present body and will go on existing because it's immortal, it can't be destroyed. The body is mortal, but the soul isn't.

And that's been hugely popular in many Christian circles for many, many years, but it's that idea of an immortal soul, which I think the New Testament explicitly refutes. Paul says God is the only one who has immortality, and then God gives it to those who, dot, dot. Now, so I would say park the idea of the soul because again, though the New Testament uses the word "psuhe" or "sikey", which is the word we often translate, soul, it quite clearly doesn't mean by "suke", "sike", what Plato meant and what the great Platonic tradition has meant.

It simply means our life, our ordinary life, the thing which it's hard to describe but easy to know, that I'm just living my life, as we say. And the New Testament uses the word "sukey" for that, the ordinary human life that we know, with all its vibrancy and all its interiority and all its awareness and so on. So the New Testament does use the word which we translate as soul, but it doesn't mean the Platonic, constantly immortal thing.

The way I would do it is this, because some people, of course, have said, well, the Bible also talks about as going to sleep before the resurrection. So maybe we are just not conscious. Maybe we in a sense don't really exist except in God's memory or something like that.

And I think that's wrong because Paul says, "My desire is to depart and be with the Messiah, which is far better." And he says in 2 Corinthians 5, "I want to be ideally away from the body and at home with the Lord." And that sense of at home is what's given some Christians a sense of, "Well, heaven is our home, that's where we're going." That's

not what Paul means at that point at all. What I think we might be able to say is this, that when somebody is indwelt by God's own spirit, by the Holy Spirit, then Paul does talk and the New Testament talks about our spirit, not in the Platonic sense of a synonym for soul, but as though we have or are a spirit and God's own spirit comes to reside within us and to shape our life so that then when our body dies, then it isn't that the Holy Spirit, as it were, says, "Well, that was interesting to occupy that person for a while, but now I'm going off somewhere else." It is as though just as we have been shaped by the spirit, so in a sense the spirit has been shaped by us to a small extent, no doubt. So that when Paul then says, talking about what baptism means in Colossians 3, you have died and your life is hidden with the Messiah in God.

I think if we said to Paul at that point, "This would be the spirit we're talking about." I think he would say, "Well, of course, the person you now are is indwelt by the Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of the Living God." And after death, that spirit, which has in a sense become you, is the bearer of your identity until the time when the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal body also. I think that's as good as we can get. And I am fascinated by the fact that we in modern Western Christianity and in Eastern Christianity as well are so bothered by these questions, which the New Testament obviously wasn't bothered by at all, because they don't give us an extended discussion or theory.

They just give us these hints, which does say to me that we maybe have got our priorities a bit wrong there? Yes. Well, these questions I'm sure will fascinate us until we experience what that reality is. To experience it.

I mean, like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, I think there will be a moment when we'll say, "Of course, how did we not see it? It's so obvious. This is how it had to be." I often think of that, both in terms of that, if you like being with Christ's state, but also that new creation, which in a sense we do only have picture language for. But I of course sometimes imagine it'll be rather like moving from the experience of living in a two-dimensional world to a three-dimensional world.

And once you're in that, it all becomes glaringly obvious, but you can't in a sense get your head around it when you're living in the two-dimensional sort of realm. Exactly. And somebody sent me a cartoon, well, whatever it is, yesterday, which was an interviewer saying, "How would you like to describe yourself?" And the answer from the interviewee was verbally, but I've also prepared a dance, which I really liked.

How would you like to describe yourself? Well, I can do it in words, but I've also prepared a dance. I mean, there's a sense in which the truth can better be spoken in super-verbal ways. Not that words are bad, but that there are other things as well, like music and dance and so on.

Hi there. Before we go any further, I want you to know about a very special e-book we're

releasing this month called Critical Race Theory and Christianity. This e-book draws from two unbelievable podcasts with Neil Shenvie, Rassselberry, Owen Strand and Jermaine Marshall, addressing questions like, "Has so-called woke ideology taken over parts of the church, or is white privilege a problem in the church?" And, "Is critical race theory compatible with the gospel?" I'd love for you to have a copy of this powerful e-book as my special thanks to you for your gift to Premier Insight today.

The ministry that brings you this podcast each week. You see, all of the conversations, insight, resources and encouragement that you get from Premier Insight programs, like this one, are only possible because of the support of wonderful friends like you. Without your generosity, none of this would be possible.

So please, go to premierinsight.org/give and make a donation today. That's premierinsight.org/give and don't forget to download our newest e-book, Critical Race Theory and Christianity as my special thank you. Let's go to another question.

This is from Spencer Owen who says, "Hello Doctor Wright. I wondered if you could weigh in on how you view the function of the old covenant. When I read passages like Roman 710 and Isaiah 48 17-19, it seems that there was a genuine life-giving role for Torah, even in the flesh and within the old covenant.

Is the life-giving role of Torah only able to be fulfilled in the Messiah? Are the promises of life through obedience that I read in the Old Testament nothing more than a hopeless dead end before the Messiah? Thanks so much. And you might want to just briefly explain what those Romans 710 and Isaiah 48 passages are. The Romans 710 one is where Paul in the midst of one of his densest discussions, be it said, Romans 7 to 25, he talks about the commandment which was unto life proved to be death to me.

And then the Isaiah passages, if only you had harkened to my commandments because then everything would have been wonderful. You'd have had peace like a river, etc. But now you've gone on wandering away in your own way.

And in a sense, that statement of a problem in Isaiah 48 leads to the extraordinary solution of Isaiah 52 and 53, which is the coming of the Kingdom of God through the work of the suffering servant. In the same way as for Paul, the statement of the problem. Well, there was the commandment which was unto life, but it proved to be death.

But then Romans 8, there is therefore now no condemnation for those in Messiah Jesus. That's a very similar sequence of thought and we find it again and again. One thing we have to be careful about here.

People often look back at the Old Testament and they say, in effect, were people saved then? Was anybody being saved by God then? And that's not the way that the early Christians would have looked at the Old Testament. I think they would have said, of course, there are many, many myriads of Israelites who were following as best they could. But the problem was Israel as a whole was rebelling and backsliding, etc.

And you see it in the stories in the wilderness, in the book of Numbers, for instance, when they are worshipping Baal, Pehor and before that, when they are worshipping the golden calf. But there are always some who are faithful and the Levites stay faithful or Phineas is the zealous one and so on. So it's not the case that every single Israelite in the past was always a complete dead loss, etc.

Paul isn't saying that, the Old Testament isn't saying that. What I think we have to come to terms with, the letter to the Hebrews really makes this its major theme, is that throughout Genesis through to chronicles, or Genesis through to Malachi, different ways you organize the Old Testament canon, there is this sense that this is God's purpose for the world. Israel is carrying that purpose, but Israel is also a classic example of the problem from which the world needed to be rescued.

And that goes back to Abraham. You see the Abraham stories, Abraham is this man of great faith, and then the very next chapter, he blows it by going off to Egypt and saying Sarah is his sister instead of his wife, etc. Isaac the same, Jacob the same, great promises, great disasters, Joseph and his brothers, similar kind of thing.

And it's as though the Old Testament narrative is saying the whole time, we are carrying these great and precious promises, but we're in a mess. What's to happen? And so I think one of the things we learn in reading the New Testament is to look back at the Old Covenant and say that really was God's way of preparing Israel and the world for his own coming in the flesh, in the flesh of Jesus the Messiah. And it's as though Israel, BC, there's very much a Christian view of them, a New Testament view of Israel, BC, had to live with that tension.

You see it in Galatians 3, you see it supremely in Romans 9 and 10. And it's a matter of agony for Paul. It's not a matter of looking back and saying, "Well, silly old them." For Paul, these are people he loves and he prays for them.

And so we have to wrestle with the bigger picture of God's purpose for Israel, from Abraham through to the Messiah. That's the story of Galatians 3. While not using that as a way of saying, therefore every single person who came before Jesus cannot have been saved because, we're not talking about individual salvation there. We're talking about God's purpose for the nation as a whole.

And Paul's point, particularly, and I see that, obviously in Isaiah 40-55 as well, would be that, okay, read the story from Genesis through to the end of two kings, and you'll see the wonderful things that God did, and yet the people rebelled and ended up, as he had promised, in exile. And the exile there is like the exile of Adam and Eve from the garden. And anyone reading Genesis 1, 2, and 3, and then skipping on to the end of two kings

would say, "Oh my goodness, Israel acted out on a large scale what happened to Adam and Eve.

Israel was given this land flowing with Milkenani, this new Eden, this land, whatever." And eight of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they twisted things to serve their own purposes, and they, like Adam and Eve, have had to be driven out. And the question is, now what's going to happen? And that's where the story is as it were in abeyance, and the New Testament comes in and says, "So this is what God then did." Thank you so much for that answer. I hope that was helpful Spencer from the Enduroit discussion group.

Now we're just bumping up against the time for today's edition of the podcast, so we've got lots more questions though from the group, and some that I really want to get to. So what we'll do is we'll do a part two in the next edition of the podcast, but thank you so much for being with me on today's edition of the show and for answering all these questions. And well, we thank you very much the Enduroit discussion group on Facebook, and I will see you next time, Tom.

Thank you. Thank you very much.

[Music] Well thank you again for listening to today's show.

Earlier on we were talking obviously about the fact Tom will be joining me along with Douglas Murray for that special big conversation livestream Thursday the 13th of May in the evening in the UK, earlier on in the afternoon if you're listening on the West Coast. You can find out how to be part of that by going to the big conversation dot show. Don't forget as well to book in.

If you haven't yet, be part of our unbelievable live conference on Saturday the 15th of May, unbelievable dot live for that. And don't forget that today's show brought you in partnership with NT Right Online and SBCK. SBCK Tom's UK publishers have some special deals on Tom's book for podcast listeners, links to everything I've just mentioned in the show notes.

Next week Tom's back tackling some more of the questions that came in from the NT Right discussion group on Facebook. Until then, have a good week.

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