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#160 Why bother improving the world? Can Christians attain perfection?

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Why bother with earth and not just create heaven? Why try to make the world a better place if God is going to fix it? Is the world getting better or worse because of Christianity? Can Christians achieve perfection in this life, as Wesley claimed? Tom Wright answers listeners questions on the 'now-and-not-yet' of new creation.

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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. The

Ask NTY Anything podcast.

Hello and welcome back to the show, brought to you in partnership with NT Right Online and SBCK, Tom's UK publisher. I'm Justin Briley and today on the show questions like, "Why bother with earth and not just create heaven? Why try to make the world a better place if God's going to fix it in the end and is the world getting better or worse because of Christianity?" Tom is answering listener questions on the now and not yet of new creation this week. Plus an interesting question on whether Christians can achieve perfection in this life as well.

By the way, Richard in New Zealand said, "It's a profoundly helpful podcast. Thank you for leaving this review, Richard, especially so for people with an evangelical background who like me grew up with a very limited view of the gospel, which didn't really give a convincing framework for how we should then live." So glad it's been helpful to you out in New Zealand, Richard, and if you can leave us a rating and a review on your podcast provider, it does help others to discover the show as well. By the way, we've got something coming up later on in March that you may want to be part of.

It's another Ask Anything show, this time a live one with William Lane Craig, one of the best-known Christian apologists and philosophers in the world. You can be part of it on the 21st of March. It's online, you can attend from anywhere in the world.

It's free. You need to register at unbelievable.live. If you'd like to be part of that, the link is with today's show. For now, let's leap into your questions.

Well, today I'm talking with Tom on your questions on the world, and it's going to be sort of a flow into next week's session where we're talking about Kingdom work as well. But people have questions around why we should bother with improving the world about, you know, how what we do now makes a difference to the world to come and so on. So let's leap into some of these.

In fact, two that I think are quite similar, and I'll ask them both in one go as it were, Tom Steven from Toronto in Canada, first of all, says, "Why wouldn't God just skip the Earth bit and go straight to the new heavens and the new Earth? I can't see how it would be just for our learning or growing since, I assume, still warm babies, et cetera, are not excluded." And then in a similar vein, Sam from Vancouver in Canada says, "If there will eventually be a ground resurrection and a perfect new Earth, what's our motivation to lean into and engage with our physical and immediate world?" I take the Sermon on the Mount very seriously and approach the gospel fairly humanistically. But if part of the gospel is so teerologically driven, perhaps you can explain that, Fred is Tom, "I find it troubling to hold the two at the same time." So yeah, questions here on what the point is, I suppose, if this is all a precursor to the new heaven and new Earth, what difference really does it make? How good a job we're doing in the here and now and so on, so on, Tom? Yeah, these are great questions. And I think one of the exciting things about these

questions is that they clearly arise from a new awareness that many people have that the Bible isn't telling a story of how we leave this Earth and go to heaven, but is telling a story of how God is planning the new heavens and new Earth, which both of these questioners refer to.

And then the question, which is a very biblical question, comes back, "How long, O Lord, how long? Why are you delaying? Why can't you make it all happen right away?" Which is a question that comes in the Psalms, it comes in the prophets, it comes in the book of Revelation, et cetera, et cetera. And the question of apparent divine delay has been with us for a very long time. And I think that is bound to be about our perception.

I've often said to students when they're thinking about what they're going to go on and do, that you will get the guidance you need when you need it, which is probably quite a bit later than when you want it. And I think that happens the same with lots of other things as well in life. It seems to me that the underlying answer to this question is very similar to what we said in a previous episode about prayer, that God wants humans to be involved in the work.

Humans are not just decoration, they're not just the sort of primary characters in God's puppet show. It's much more than that. God has created us to be responsible agents within his world.

And as I've said before on the show, I think this is ultimately Christological. God makes humans to be independent, but obedient agents, that's always a paradox, so that he might himself come in the person of his son and become the agent within his world, the perfectly obedient son who nevertheless, as Hebrews says, learned obedience through what he suffered. Now why couldn't Jesus just come, blast all the opposition out of the way and say, okay, we're just going straight for it now.

The answer seems to have to do as many Jewish thinkers were aware with the patience of God and God not willing to foreclose on the evil that's out there in the world too soon. Many Jewish writers and some early Christian writers were quite clear about this. If God stepped in and said, okay, we're making the new thing right now, there's an awful lot of people who are at present rebelling and not wanting to be part of that, who would be left out, who would exclude themselves from that.

And God wants to wait and woo them and bring more people to be part of the great project and to have a share in the ultimate new creation. And so that's all going on in the background, as it were. And then I go to verses like 1 Corinthians 15:58, which regular listeners to this podcast will have heard me talk about before, where Paul says, "At the end of the great chapter on resurrection of all things, therefore get on with your work because in the Lord it's not wasted." And that's the key thing that what you do in the present will somehow, as that great theological word somehow, will somehow be part of the new world God is going to make.

Jesus talks about giving a cup of cold water to somebody because they believe in him and that that person will not go unremembered for doing that, that even small gestures like that will be taken up and woven into the great tapestry of God's new creation. Now I don't know how, you know, the book that I'm trying to write at the moment or the painting that an artist down the road is painting at the moment, I don't know how they will be part of God's new creation. Like many things, like the resurrection itself, it's something that we actually take as a matter of faith, as a matter of belief, you know, that the resurrection seems highly unlikely, of course, because we know that dead bodies stay dead.

But all the evidence for Jesus' resurrection is so strong that, and the fact that when a community is built on that, it actually works and becomes what we now know as the church, that, okay, we go with that and then we say, well, if that's what God's going to do, maybe God can and will take even the small things that we are called to do in the present and weave them into this great picture. I think Justin, you will have heard me use the illustration before and probably other listeners will, of the stonemason working on the cathedral, who has been told he's got to carve this bit of stone with this particular pattern, and he can't even see where that bit of the pattern is going to fit into the next stone. Somebody else is working on that at a different bench.

It's only when all the stones are taken up and put onto the great west front of the cathedral or whatever, that they all make sense. And the stonemason has been working for the cathedral. He's not been building the cathedral.

He's been carving for the cathedral in the same way. We are not building God's kingdom. We are building for the kingdom.

So improvements in the world now are going to be part of that. And of course, we have seen, I think this is going to be a later question, we have seen all sorts of things in the world radically change as a result of the gospel. And I don't think we should just say, "Oh, well, that was nice, but it's kind of incidental." It seems to me that is actually part of what God is up to with all of this.

So this is Sam from Vancouver in British Columbia, says, "I approached the gospel fairly humanistically, but if part of the gospel is so theologically driven." I'm not sure what that meant. So theology is about salvation, God rescuing us from death and all the causes it, particularly sin. But the humanistic thing is about being genuinely human, and we are saved precisely in order to be genuine humans.

And so I think... For me, I wonder if what Sam's referring to there, I thought perhaps he's hinting at that often, that dichotomy that people do bring up between sort of, "Are we here to do social justice on behalf of the kingdom or are we here to get people saved?" And I suspect perhaps that's what's driving Sam's question there. So when he says, "I approached the gospel fairly humanistically, I interpreted it in this sort of way in which

we're supposed to do good social justice and so on." But yet I can see that it's also about people being transferred from the kingdom of darkness into light. So if it's really about that, does any of this social justice stuff make any difference to that? The two flow together.

Here's the mantra which I've developed over the last few years. God is going to put the whole world right. That's what he's promised.

It's there in the Psalms, in Isaiah, it's in the New Testament. God is going to put the whole world right. In the present time, through the gospel and the spirit, he puts human beings right at his justification, so that they can be part of his putting right project for the world.

And as I've often said, if Jesus is raised from the dead and has sent his spirit to be with us, then of course this starts now. It isn't postponed until some future date. The energy of resurrection and the spirit is there to enable us to be putting right people in the present, which is why if we don't care about justice in the world, et cetera, et cetera, why should we expect people to believe us in a gospel which is about God putting the whole world right, which is of course, soteriology, because it's rescuing the world from death and corruption and decay and everything that causes it specifically sin.

Yeah, thank you very much. Always helpful to be reminded, I suppose, that we've sometimes falsely created this dichotomy between the two. But I do feel that's getting better, Tom, that increasingly people are sort of, you know, putting those two together.

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/NT.

That's premierinsight.org/NT. And please do remember to request your copy of *Against the Flow*. Thank you for your generosity.

William Lane Craig was once described by Sam Harris as the one Christian apologist who seems to have put the fear of God into many of my fellow atheists. Now you can bring your objections and ask your questions of the Godfather of Christian apologetics Bill Craig as he joins me Justin Briley for a live show on Tuesday the 21st of March. He'll

reflect on debating some of the best known skeptics in the world and his groundbreaking philosophical arguments for God's existence.

It's free to attend but advanced registration is essential. Go to unbelievable dot live to ask William Lane Craig anything that's unbelievable dot live. See you there.

Here's another question from Marshall in Boise Idaho. Essentially it boils down to is the world getting better or worse. He says it seems here in America that many Christians especially more conservative groups think the world is much more evil than it ever has been before and that the world will continue to grow more evil until the consummation or whatever happens next.

That idea is supported with tech such as in the last days there will come times of difficulty second Timothy and indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted while evil people and imposters go from bad to worse deceiving and being deceived again from second Timothy. And now Marshall says I struggle with this perspective. It seems to me that if the resurrection changed the course of history the kingdom of God should be gradually spreading and bringing more love and healing to the whole creation of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end to quote Isaiah.

Which is it? Is God's world getting better or worse? How should we think about the future of the world for Christians and all people? Yeah thank you Marshall. This is a great question and it's really really important culturally because how people see the world whether it's getting better or worse has a great deal to do with what they then think they ought to be doing in the world. Part of the problem I see with people saying that the world is getting worse and worse is that that tends to inculcate a sense that there's only a few of us proper Christians left and there's fewer and fewer and we just have to sort of huddle together and wait for God to rescue us.

That was a very popular view in the 19th century and indeed that was the view of those Plymouth brethren folk who basically invented the new modern version of a doctrine of the rapture that were waiting for God to get us out of here and the world is just going to get worse and worse and worse until that happens and so on and so on. Now it's interesting culturally that in the early 18th century and really behind that as well 16th and 17th century there was a lot of reformational thought which generated the idea precisely that the world was getting better and better and the parade example in the first half of the 18th century is Handel's Messiah where the the Beretto for the Messiah which is all taken from biblical texts is about Jesus doing what he did and then the gospel spreading out into the whole world ending with the Hallelujah Chorus the kingdoms of the world have become the kingdom of our garden of his Christ before the general resurrection which happens in the next bit of the great oratorium. So you get the conversion of the world and there were many in the early 18th century who thought the

world was getting better and better under the influence of the gospel.

Well they could see that there were many signs of that that the missionaries went out and brought modern medicine and so on such as it was then to many communities that didn't have it. Unfortunately they also brought all sorts of other things and it was that awareness of the ambiguity of a kind of Christian optimism which then by the end of the 18th century produced this sense that no no no the gospel is kind of shrinking there's only a few of us who believe anymore and that now this was then pushed of course by the secularists in in Europe and America that now the state is going to do it the state is going to do education the state is going to do medicine the state will look after people and you Christians you go and teach people to say their prayers so they can go to heaven one day so all of that is going on I and others have written at length about this great shift but ever since then the late 18th century which is precisely where in America and France in their modern forms got founded as it were and there's been that sense that that we have the split of church and state and the church is just about these people who are going to heaven one day but the secular world is now doing everything else thank you very much now of course since the secular dream has had some pretty nasty shocks through the 20th century whether it's the first world war or ending and then the beginning of the 21st century with 9/11 or whatever the sense of the secular dream running out of steam has been quite important but then you do get pockets and I guess Idaho may be one of them where people are still clinging to the basically 19th century view of the world getting worse and worse and worse and a few Christians clinging on for dear life as in those apparent meaning of those texts from 2 Timothy but I want to say two or three things here my my friend Tom Holland the historian who just in those well and we've talked together on this show Tom Holland has written a book recently called *Dominion* in which he's pointed out historically speaking that the world has changed radically through the impact of the Christian gospel even when people deny it so that the secular assumptions of secular modernity are themselves quite remarkably shaped by impulses which came from the Judea Christian tradition it was an example just this last week I'm recording this show just after the terrible earthquake in Turkey and Syria and one of the things that's happening almost at once is that the international community as we now call it is pitching in with relief efforts with teams of people who are expert at digging out collapsed buildings with people sending blankets and tents with people sending food and medicine from around the world now I'm an ancient historian first and foremost that would never have happened in the Roman Empire you have an earthquake lots of people have died oh well that's too bad as you must have been crossed with them or Athenians sent a thunderbolt or something but we shrug our shoulders and yeah there are some very sad people out there and they'll probably be begging on the streets but there's not a lot we can do about it and already in the book of Acts fascinatingly we see the beginning of the response to that that when there's a famine which is prophesied the church in Antioch 400 miles north of Jerusalem they say those people in Jerusalem who gave up all their possessions and are being persecuted for their faith they're going to be

in trouble we're going to send them help now the church in Antioch was not a Jewish church they were mostly Gentiles they were non-Jewish they weren't part of the same geographical area or family or culture but they knew they were part of a larger family and they had an obligation to treat as family the people who were going to be suffering now as I say in ancient history that would never have happened the Greeks and the Romans wouldn't have bothered if something bad happened get out of town and run re-establish yourself somewhere else wash your hands of it too bad but now the whole world broadly speaking not everybody but the world as a whole tends to think oh my goodness there are human beings who are suffering there we've got to go and help and the fact that we now know that education is good for everybody and we ought to try and provide it it's difficult but we know likewise medicine these are signs that actually the impulse of the Christian gospel rooted in the Jewish world has made enormous impacts on the way that people think the very idea of human rights nobody in the ancient world thought about human rights you know we've got slaves and we can do what we like with them and class many men thought we've got women we can do what we like with them etc etc the idea of human rights which it's a struggle we're don't always get it right we sometimes misunderstand it but it is rooted in the Christian gospel so goodness knows what God wants to do in the next generation maybe there are other ways in which Christian witness could be transforming the world transforming attitudes transforming people's beliefs in what makes for a good and wise society that's a very exciting possibility and the negativity of saying oh no the world's getting worse and worse merely puts the break on any such creative Christian exploration of options and I think it's time to take that break off and say what can and should we be doing thank you very much Tom there's that's a helpful and balanced answer to to that question maybe we can just squeeze one more in and and having talked about you know the state of the world better or worse this is a question more at a personal level from Justin in Chattanooga Tennessee he wants to know about Christian perfection and is it possible so Justin is a Methodist pastor and says I've studied a great deal of your fellow Anglican John Wesley I'm curious about your thoughts on Christian perfection Wesley would not have claimed to be a theologian and his views seemed to change over the course of his life but he seemed to believe that Christian perfection was attainable and likely even necessary in this life through the power and gift of God's sanctifying grace and our participation in the new kingdom it's hard to narrow the doctrine down to a few sentences without committing heresy but I hope Tom had some thoughts on the matter of Christian perfection so I mean first of all I'm amused that that he counts Tom Wesley a fellow Anglican when most people would assume he's a he is a Methodist obviously but but obviously he started out as an Anglican we can comment on that because John Wesley himself said towards the end of his life I live and die a member of the Church of England and I advise you all to do the same in other words he didn't want to start a new church he wanted to be a pressure group transforming the church within I very much sympathize with that our present church certainly in England and Anglicans around the world needs a lot of transforming and there's always a danger of new breakaway

movements which then just dissipate energy that's the real problem with breakaway movements that they take more energy than working from within the structures if you can so point taken I was recently at an Asbury seminary in Kentucky and there is a statue of John Wesley there and I went and paid homage he was a very little chap much shorter than me I think he was only 5 foot 2 or something like that and the thought of this little man with all this amazing energy leaping on his horse and going off and preaching the gospel in fields and open air and to miners and so on wonderful now the question of Christian perfection actually goes back at least as far as St. Augustine who wrote a whole treatise on this and Augustine seemed I'm not an Augustinian scholar but my memory is that he seemed to want to have his cake and eat it you wanted to say on the one hand that if we really believe in the Holy Spirit then in theory it is possible that the spirit will work more and more and someone's life until they are fully in tune with what God the father is doing fully shaped according to the pattern of Jesus Christ etc however Augustine knew only too well from his own experience and as a pastor and a bishop that most people were nowhere near that and in fact the Christian life seems to be a grinding of gears between the pull of the old and the energy of the new and certainly that's been my experience as a Christian I suppose as I look back there are many things in my life where I think maybe the Holy Spirit has enabled me to improve in this way in this way but I'm very much aware of other areas where I pray Lord have mercy on me a sinner and I pray that the spirit will do fresh work because the standard is pretty high if you read Romans 6 7 and 8 which are passages I come back to again and again we are not encouraged to settle down with the second best we are not told oh well it's all right just make a bit of an effort and that'll be okay no we are told if by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body then you will live but if you allow the flesh or the body to have its own way all the time then you are courting the destruction of death because you're playing with playing with fire if you're doing that so those warnings are real and they imply that it is possible to advance in the spirit but what counts as perfection you know there were great movements in the 19th century of partly of Wesleyans but partly of others of Baptists etc who reckoned that you could have a second blessing or maybe a third blessing after you've been converted later there would be this new infilling of the spirit and you would attain a level of sanctity where you could no longer sin and Charles hadn't Spurgeon the great Baptist preacher in the 19th century had a short way with people who said that in one of his I think letters he says that this some gentleman came to see him and told him that the Holy Spirit had enabled him to live with complete sinless perfection and Spurgeon said so I picked up the water jug and emptied it over his head and his perfection did not seem to remain very long after that Spurgeon would have no truck with that kind of pompous oh yes the Lord has enabled me now to be totally sinless now it is possible that there are some humans who through prayer and fasting and meditation and through meeting Jesus in the faces of the poor and working for the good of the people who are at the bottom of the pile etc who do start to become more significantly holy and complete and the thing is they would be the last ones to realize it they would be the ones who would say no no of course not I'm a sinner like the

rest of you but other people might see in them people have sometimes talked about such people with their faces actually shining without realizing it and so there are all sorts of pathways here I think the main thing to say is we have to be constantly cautious about making claims about ourselves we have to hold before ourselves the model of the complete holiness of Jesus and pray for his spirit that we may approximate more and more to that while being realistic about who we are and where we are it's a yeah I think the danger is to cut the knot by saying oh yes you can be perfectly holy now get on and do it I don't think that's realistic thank you very much something you said there reminded me of that phrase there is about quantum physics if you think you've understood quantum physics then you haven't understood quantum physics in light manner you could say if you if you think you've achieved perfection then you probably haven't achieved perfection but yeah anyway yeah good stuff thank you very much Tom it's lovely to catch up I should just have quoted Philippians 3 Paul says I haven't yet attained this I am not already perfect but I press on to make it my own because Messiah Jesus has made me his own Philippians 3 is the crucial text on that that's a good good place to end it thank you very much Tom for these questions we're going to continue this theme of of the kingdom work and what the kingdom looks like and how we can you know think about that in our own lives in a practical way today that'll be coming up on next week's show but for now thanks for being with me this week Tom thank you thank you well I hope you enjoyed today's show and if you find it helpful do consider supporting us at premier unbelievable calm where you can also register for our regular newsletter and never miss a thing plus of course you get the link to ask Tom a question yourself by the way that live show with William Lane Craig is coming up on Tuesday the 21st of March you can register for free to be part of the live online audience at unbelievable dot live for now God bless you and see you next week when Tom will be answering questions on what counts as kingdom work

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