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#23 Tom talks about life, faith and atonement

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

In this interview with NT Wright from The Profile podcast, Justin Brierley interviews Tom about his life and faith, as well as his theology of atonement in his book *The Day The Revolution Began*.

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Transcript

Hi there, before we begin today's podcast, I want to share an incredibly special resource with you today. If you're like me, life can get pretty hectic pretty quickly, but one thing that helps me slow down is connecting with God in new ways, and I'd like to share a resource that has really helped me do that. It's called "Five Ways to Connect with God" and you can download it for free right now at PremierInsight.org/Resources. I think you'll find refreshment for your soul.

So go right now to PremierInsight.org/Resources and download your copy. That's PremierInsight.org/Resources. Premier Podcasts The Ask NT Wright Anything Podcast Hello and welcome. It's Justin Bradley with you for your fortnightly theology fest.

Welcome along and actually not quite fortnightly at the moment because we've had a little bit of a break in recording with Tom. He's been rather busy at the moment with his move from Scotland down to Oxford. But we're in the process of lining up some fresh editions of The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

So to tide you over for the moment, I'm going to be bringing you something from the archives. It's a profile interview recorded a couple of years ago around the time of the release of the day the revolution began. Tom's book on the atonement.

So look out for that coming to you in a moment's time. Thanks to all those who said hi at the recent Unbelievable Live in LA event. It was great to meet some listeners of The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast who had transitioned over to Unbelievable as well, my other podcast.

But great time there and if you want to hear more about it, go and listen to the Unbelievable podcast and I'll be telling you all about it there and releasing some of the material from what was a fantastic event in Costa Mesa. But here on the show, still running our competition, make sure you're subscribed to our newsletter by the end of October. If you do, you'll be in the running for that Bible for everyone draw.

Three copies of that to give away, all signed by Tom and you can get the latest videos, bonus content and of course, ask a question yourself by getting subscribed to the newsletter and the website as usual ask NT Wright dot com. So we'll be getting back to your question to Tom on the next edition of the podcast. But today it's my questions and this is from an interview I recorded with Tom a couple of years ago for a different podcast, the Profile podcast, which is produced in association with Premier Christianity magazine.

If you enjoy what you're here today, then you might be interested in subscribing to that podcast as well actually, the profile from Premier Christianity because every single week they bring really interesting interviews with all kinds of Christians from all walks of life. You can find that again wherever you get your podcast from. It's one of a number of podcasts that Premier produced.

But for now, here's my interview with Tom talking about his life, faith and ministry and talking about his atonement theology. Well, I'm thrilled to be joined on the profile today by Tom Wright. Tom Wright, of course, is well known to many as a leading British Bible scholar.

He's a former Anglican bishop as well. And he's got all kinds of books to his name, both his, if you like, academic work as NT Wright and his popular level books as Tom Wright. Tom, welcome along to the profile.

It's great to have you on the show today. We like to talk about all aspects of someone's life. We've got little time though, so we'll have a condensed version of your story.

You grew up in a Christian family, is that correct? Yes, a church-going family, a very ordinary middle Anglican type church on Sundays, hymns around the piano saying prayers at bedtime. And I was encouraged to read my Bible from quite an early age. And

once having started, I have never seen any reason to stop.

And you've gone on to read it in the original Greek as well. I'm always amazed when you do a show with me here at Premier Christian Radio. You sort of can recall things to mind, but you can equally just translate on the spot from your Greek.

Well, the Greek New Testament is quite a small book. I mean, it's not as though it's the entire corpus of classical Greek. One can know this little book quite well.

Yes, absolutely. What persuaded you that you wanted to go in the direction of academia? Did you ever consider any other kind of vocation in New York? Oh, yes. I knew from an early age I wanted to be ordained.

My grandfather, my mother's father was a parish priest who was an archdeacon. And he was a super chap. And I remember as a small boy just liking him enormously and thinking, wow, that's what I'd like to do.

I'd be up there on a Sunday and preaching and leading services. And he was a great singer as well. And I've always enjoyed singing.

Music's been very important. Church music's been very important. But it was then only in my late teens when I scraped into oxen blood skin in my teeth and then started studying philosophy.

But I started to realize this huge world of ideas out there and grappling with marvelous great things and great writers. And then started to think, wow, I wonder if maybe somehow I could be part of all that. And how does that fit with being a priest, with being ordained, with preaching sermons? Then the more I was studying theology, the more I thought, this is what I wanted to do, spend my life studying the Bible and teaching people about it.

And of course, clergy ought to be doing that. So in a sense, I've been riding those two horses and the academic and the pastoral. I've tried to keep them in balance, though it's not always been easy.

Who would you say were your great influences growing up and through those student years? Well, through my teens, there was a man who sadly has just died this last week, a man called Richard Gory, who you won't have heard of. He was English but worked all his life in Scotland. And he ran the Scottish scripture union camps.

And I used to go to those as often as I could in school holidays and then was a helper on them when I was at student age myself. And Richard was a wonderful patient, loving, prayerful Bible teacher, a very wise man, a very godly man, the sort of man that you really wanted to be with as much as you could. But when you were with him, it was kind of special.

It was a bit like being with Jesus. I mean, quite seriously. And he was a huge influence on me.

There were teachers through my undergraduate years, Keith Weston, who was a director of St Edge Church in Oxford, was a great preacher and teacher, a lovely friend and support. My own graduate teacher was George Cadd, a great scholar and a great influence on me. And then Charlie Mole in Cambridge, I got to know laterally after he'd retired, another great New Testament scholar.

And these were wonderful people who held Christian ministry and preaching and a prayerful life with biblical scholarship and just fused the two together. And, you know, if I could be a little bit like that, that would be great. When did you get ordained? Was it in the 70s? I was ordained in the mid 70s when I slightly delayed because I was doing my doctorate, but I was ordained Deacon in 75, priest in 76.

So I'm coming up to my 40th anniversary. There you go. So 40 years later, I mean, did you have any idea what the church or part of the Anglican church would look like today? What the particular issues, particularly? Nobody saw coming what we have had over the last generation or two.

Although when you understand where we are now, you can see the roots of it going a long way back. I didn't know very much at that stage about the World Wide Church. Although when I was quite young, I was asked to go as a young delegate to the World Council of Churches in Nairobi in 1975, which was fascinating.

That was my opener because the World Council had everything from extreme far left people to Greek Orthodox and everything. So to discover that one was part of a much larger family, it was a wonderful experience, but also quite scary. I think I've gone on being amazed and awed and also a little bit anxious about the World Wide Church and where it's all going.

Do you think that if you were able to make an informed choice today, let's say, that it wasn't influenced by the circumstances you grew up in? Would you be an Anglican, do you think? Oh, that's a good question. This is not, I mean, it's very odd. It's like, could you have had different parents or what? Exactly, yes.

Of course I grew up in it. There have been moments when I've thought, do I really belong here? Should I be somewhere else? And of course, there are many people who grew up in one denomination and have moved elsewhere. I happen not to have done.

And one of the reasons for that is partly a love of the classic liturgy and its music. And it's a great tradition to be musically prayerful or prayerfully musical in, but also because the Anglican tradition at its best showcases Scripture itself in a way that few others do, morning and evening prayer and the Eucharist, if done properly, you get an awful lot of

Bible flowing through your system, not just as information, but as prayer, as worship. And that to me has always been very essential and important.

I read an interesting article recently which said, as much as it appreciated the love of the Bible that evangelicals have, they often aren't that good necessarily in their informal worship styles of actually presenting the Bible. Absolutely. And I was discussing this with some folks just the other day because actually what good liturgy does, if you have an Old Testament reading, a New Testament reading, these are not to inform you.

We used to call them the lessons, the first lesson, the second lesson, which was misleading. That's actually a bad translation of *Lectio*, which means reading. Because what you're doing with the little bit of the Old Testament you read is you're pushing who knows up against the window and seeing the whole sweep of everything from Genesis to Malachi.

Ditto, this little bit of the New Testament, you have in your mind the whole sweep of the New Testament. The reason you're reading them is to celebrate the mighty acts of God. And you happen to be privileged to be witnessing this and just holding them briefly before God, rather than saying, this is the bit I need to learn.

Of course, there will be bits you need to learn and push on. But I would love to see us recapture that. And also, to discover the people in our congregations who know how to read well in public.

It isn't just, and nor is it a matter of a sort of a high-faluting West End actor going over the top, but a matter of wise, powerful, clear, interesting reading, preferably with new translations being used to bring out more of the flavour. When you read the Bible, do you tend to read it as an academic, as a historian approaching a historical text? Or do you regard it as a life-breathed, divinely inspired word that will have, be more than any other text you might read on that day? It'll do more for you than the times will. The only answer to all of that is yes.

All of the above. I was somebody suggested to me when I was a student that I should have two Bibles, one for academic study and one for personal study. And I knew as soon as that was said that that was entirely wrong.

Just as we discover who God is by looking at who Jesus was and is, and we know who Jesus was and is because he actually lived and died and rose again in first century Palestine. And if you try and bypass the history, you will get God and Jesus right. In the same way, if you imagine that this living, wonderful word isn't firmly rooted in the cultures in which it was born and written, then you will again misinterpret it so that when I'm reading, I read large chunks of the Bible morning by morning.

And I don't sort of take off one bit of the brain and put on another. I am engaging with

this text at every level and some emphases will be slightly different and some will make me pause and pray and others will make me think, oh my goodness, and scribble something down for use later on when I'm writing a lecture or whatever. But the whole thing flows together.

Well, they ask, "Enter your write anything podcast comes to you courtesy of Premier in partnership with SBCK and NT-Write online. Now, Thomas published many books and if you're just starting out, you may not know where to begin. Well, SBCK, Thomas UK publisher, currently have a buy one, get one half price deal on some of his most popular titles like Simply Christian and Simply Jesus.

Those are kind of books that help you make sense of the big picture of Christianity. There are also others you may not have heard of, such as for all the saints remembering the Christian departed and God in public how the Bible speaks truth to power today. So get the buy one, get one half price deal over at sbckpublishing.co.uk/askntwrite. What would you say is the biggest change of mind you've had when it comes to your understanding of Scripture? Interesting.

In all the time you've been doing, I know lots of people whose minds have been changed by you and the way you've presented Scripture and they're fresh weight to them. But what was that moment for you? It's interesting. I suppose it was a change from an early, I'll use the shorthand first and then I'll explain it, an early dualism to a realization of what it meant that God is the creator and the recreator.

And I can track this because I was asked to write a little commentary on Colossians many years ago. And in the middle of Colossians 1, there's this wonderful passage about that Jesus is the image of God through whom and for whom and by whom all things were created and all things in heaven and earth. And when I was doing the first draft of that commentary, I really couldn't get my head around the involvement of Jesus in creation and in recreator.

Why God wants to recreate the world? Because I grown up more or less thinking that the purpose was this world is not my home, I'm just passing through. So any idea of recreation was kind of odd. And so I put that away for a couple of years.

And when I came back to it and started again, I was a little worried, what am I going to do with that difficult passage? I got to it and I couldn't see where the difficulty was. And I realized that during that period of two years, something quite deep inside me had changed. And I had been transformed myself so that now this bit of scripture was meaning what I hope it ought to mean.

And so that then has played out slowly in the rest of my life. And perhaps the biggest thing there would be that instead of talking about going to heaven when we die, which we all talked about growing up, I realized the New Testament isn't about that at all. The

kingdom of heaven is not Jesus saying, here's a kingdom called heaven and here's how to get there.

The kingdom of heaven means the sovereign rule of the God of heaven on earth as in heaven. And studying Jesus, as I've tried to do intensively historically, as well as theologically, and studying the rest of the New Testament, that has been absolutely transformative. And it goes on transforming everything else.

It isn't just that our vision of the future is now different. It's our vision of everything else of who we are is different as a result. And if I could encapsulate a theme that runs through so many of your books, this would be it.

And certainly it's there in your latest book, *The Day the Revolution began*, reconsidering the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion. And to some extent, I think what you're going against is the rather, I guess, formulaic sort of idea of there being a kind of a mathematical sum that God does. And we just need to say, sort of make sure that we're on board with that.

And then we get to heaven and we're just waiting out our time. And that somehow this equation happens at the cross. So okay, if that's not the right way to be thinking about the cross, give us your picture of the right way.

Right. I think I want to start at the end and say God's design is, as Ephesians 1 says, to join all things in heaven and on earth together in the Messiah. Now, in the Messiah, that is in Jesus, heaven and earth come together.

He is the heaven and earth person. And what he does in his life, in his inauguration of the kingdom, in his death and resurrection and ascension is to make that now a cosmic reality. And the New Testament comes back again and again and says that something happened when Jesus died as a result of which the world is a different place.

Nobody realized until Easter day and it took them a while to realize even then, but that something happened. And this is very difficult for us to talk about because it's to do with there being dark forces in the world, which we humans give power to by worshiping them, whether we call them gods or whether we just think of them as money and sex and power or whatever it is. And then they have power over us.

We worship them, which is idolatrous, are humanness fractures, which is sin, et cetera. How are we rescued from that? And here's the problem that we in the West have tended to see the whole thing in terms of have I behave myself sufficiently on right here is a moral standard. God wants me to obey it.

Oh dear, I haven't. Then God's going to punish me. Oh, fortunately, somebody gets in the way and takes the wrap on my behalf.

And I want to say that's a very low grade, almost pagan view of how a God might

behave. And it's but we get there because we have moralized our view of humanity. Morals matter enormously, but humans are more than moral keeping machines.

Humans are meant to be reflecting God's love into the world and reflecting the praises of creation back to the Creator. And it's very interesting that in the book of Revelation, it says that the blood of the lamb is shed in the new Passover so that we might be the royal priesthood, the kingdom and priests, not so that we can heave a sigh and even go to heaven. In other words, it isn't about moralizing our vision of humans.

It's about a vocation. And Jesus rescues us from all the things that get in the way of our being, the genuine human beings we are supposed to be and can start to be now to practice ahead of the final new creation. So it's a little more complicated.

Sure. I mean, much richer. But at a basic level, you know, if you ask the average Christian, what does it mean to you that Jesus died on the cross? So will he he died for my sins? He died so that I could be forgiven.

Now they may have then, if you ask them the further question, well, how did that work then? They might say, well, it's something along the lines of, you know, he took the punishment that I was owed or maybe they'll do it in the way you talk about this idea of there was a moral bar and only Christ could jump over it and so on. Okay, now are you saying that's wrong? Are you saying that's not the right way to think about there are lots of half truths out there? And as somebody said to me years ago, I forget it was, if you take a half truth and make it into the whole truth, it becomes an untruth. Okay.

And that's a very serious thing because then the vision of God that people have is distorted. And so many people are actually put off the gospel. Some of them have been tried to believe it for many years.

And then finally, they just say, no, that sounds like a bullying God. If there is a God, he can't really be like that. And sadly, there are many churches in which this vision of an angry God who's going to get you to mark blood and dah, dah, dah, dah.

Unfortunately, somebody steps in the way and he happened to be innocent and he happened to be his own son. And people, so I often said to hear some people talk about the gospel, you'd think that John 3 16 would have said God so hated the world that he killed his own son. It doesn't say God so loved the world that he gave his only son.

Now, and it's, and you, it's all very well. Sometimes people say, well, all that picture is important, wrath and sin and hell and all the rest of it. And it's because God loves us.

But simply adding the word love onto the end of that story can be actually even worse. It's because it's like what abusers do when they say, I love you so much, you know, and that's his. So the people have seen that in our generation and have reacted against it.

But I really do want to say, I didn't write this book because of those abuses. I wrote it because out of my own living with scripture for many years, I've just seen what I think is a bigger picture where it all fits together so that the punishment for our sins matters as well. He God condemned sin in the flesh of Christ.

That's important. I mean, what, what to you then is happening when someone becomes a Christian, they trust in Jesus. Do they have to have sort of understood or any level kind of believed in a particular type of exchange of sin and innocence and righteousness and so on at the cross or is it simply as simple as trusting in Jesus in, in some way? The more one knows as a pastor and as a church historian about how people have come to faith, the more you realize that God moves in many mysterious ways.

And I think for many people, it isn't at all about an intellectual thing. And this may be partly a personality thing. Some people are just gifted by God with the, I've got to think this all through a bit.

But if they're wise, they should know that there are other people for whom that may come a little bit later and they are drawn by some kind of irresistible love which they see in Jesus, maybe a painting or something, something they've read about Jesus or the story of the prodigal son. There is no atonement theory in the story of the prodigal son, but this idea of a father reaching out his arms and running down the road to welcome this wretched young lad. You know, how can you not be moved by that and just say, ah, thank you.

This is for me. And I want to say, yeah, at that very moment, God says, yes, this is for you and you're welcome. And now in the fullness of time, maybe tomorrow or next week or next year, there's some stuff you, it would be wise for you to get your hand.

I've often thought that in a sense, at the cross itself, there is that moment with Jesus and the thief and the thief, presumably not having any idea of what's going on here. It says, remember me when you come into kingdom and Jesus says today you'll be with me in paradise. And there's, so there's a sense that I've always felt as well in a way.

It's not dependent on us having a kind of right theology that we get sort of saved by. I mean, I believe in theology, I believe in learning to think Christianly. One of the great themes of most of my work is that one of the reasons the New Testament has written is to teach these early Christians to think Christianly because they're going to need to learn how to think, to navigate all the problems that they're faced with.

And the cross will be at the middle of that. But that task of learning to think Christianly is something that comes to different people at different levels at different stages. And I believe that little children can have faith.

I believe that when a parent gazes at a child or a grandchild, I did this morning with my

four month old grandson, we just had a good bit of eye contact and smiling at each other. There's a wonderful sense of love which passes between which is pre-articulate. And I really think if God is the great God we know him to be, God has the same ability to communicate with you.

And I think of that as well I suppose in terms of perhaps there are people who have limited intellectual abilities. And you told a story, I wonder if you'd retell it, of visiting a community which were a lot of people with Dan's syndrome were present and went to take communion. And they may not have a full and complete understanding of the whole path.

Yes, it's a wonderful church I remember in Houghtonless Spring actually in Counted Durham where the first time I went there I was astonished celebrating the Eucharist and looking down. And the front few rows being full of these people I think teens and twenties with Dan's syndrome and they were just thrilled to be there and part of the community. And the community was obviously thrilled to have them there.

They weren't separate, they were there. And when they came up to the communion rail, the look of utter delight reaching out their hands. And I want to say Jesus said, unless you'd be converted and become like little children, I think he just said, all like this lot.

And there is a simplicity and a total acceptance of the love of God. And I think God has a very special care for those. And that's really beautiful.

So then of course we are all given different gifts. And when you look at the stories of the early church, there are great theologians and people with the most amazing brains, irony, as Augustine, people like that. But the reason Christianity spread was because of ordinary Christians on the street looking after their neighbors, helping them when there were medical emergencies, teaching them because medicine and education were not free and just for the elite.

And these Christians were doing it for everybody. There was a sense of caring for the poor and so on. And people said, this is a different way to be human.

What's going on? And ultimately, yes, it's because something happened on the cross as a result of which the powers that had held the pagan world in a dark captivity were defeated. And the proof of that is that then the gospel can go out and people's lives can be transformed. Is this to some extent what people have termed the Christus Victor model? Yes, it is.

But the problem with that is that in the, I forget what it was, 50s and 60s, there was a famous book on Christus Victor, which played it off against the other theories. And it was that book by a Swedish bishop called Gustav Alain was obviously reacting against low grade presentations of an angry, wrathful God and substitution. And so said, no, no,

forget all that.

It's about God winning the victory in Christ over the powers. So it became an either all. So many people have thought because we believe in penal substitution, we mustn't believe in Christus Victor.

That's completely wrong. And the gospels are the place. Now here's an odd thing.

I've read a lot about the Crepolemian of the cross in the last few years. I've been working towards this book. Most of the books I've read about the cross hardly touch on the gospels.

One or two texts here and there. The gospels are all about the kingdom of God being established on earth is in heaven. And when Jesus dies on the cross, the primary thing that's about is the messianic victory.

He has King of the Jews above his head. And it is couched in terms of a victory over the powers over Herod and Pilate who have put in there. Actually, he's winning the victory.

And everything else that flows out from that representative substitution example, et cetera is within that context. In what sense, though, it sounds amazing. But in what sense did a man dying in a on a cross in the era of the Romans when thousands, tens of thousands of people would have suffered similar deaths? In what way did that usher in a revolution? In what way did that defeat the powers of darkness? The short answer is you have to read the book.

That's precisely the question which the book is trying to address. And part of our problem is that we in the modern Western church and world are so far out from thinking the way that first century Christians thought that things they could take for granted in a slogan, we have to reconstruct with difficulty like people learning a new language. But actually, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are such amazing texts.

And again, so many Christians belittle the gospels by just reading 10 or a dozen verses at a time and getting a little lesson out of it as though this is a sort of Christian version of Esau's favorites. And then the gospels are telling the story of how Israel came to its appointed vocational role in the person of Jesus, the story of how the Creator God came to do the thing which he had always promised to do in the person of Jesus. And the gospels are telling these stories so that this comes together.

But then there's the dark strand which starts right at the beginning in Matthew when you get old Herod the Great killing all the babies and plotting to kill Jesus as well, which is a bit like Pharaoh killing all the babies in Egypt and so on. But there's a sense right from then that evil is clustering around Jesus and gathering like a huge great storm cloud until in Luke's telling of the arrest in the garden, Jesus says, this is your hour and the power of darkness. And we see what's happening, that the evil of all the world is somehow being

lured onto this one place.

That's the story the gospels are telling. And it's a very odd picture for us. But the point is that on the cross, that is, dealt with Paul says God condemned sin in the flesh of the Messiah.

And the proof of that is that Jesus rises again. Right. That can only happen if evil and death have been dealt with.

And then the proof is that by God's spirit, new things happen in the world. The Kingdom of God goes out and changes lives and communities in a way which was unthinkable before. Yes.

So you sort of see the cross as this sort of point in history where from that point, God is able to move in radically new ways. Absolutely. Absolutely.

And it's very odd to say God is it because if God is God then, yes. But the answer is yes. And of course, it's all about the sort of God God is that people often say, why doesn't God do something? And people want God to send in the tanks and blip out.

But no, because of who God is, as we see actually throughout scripture, he is the God who wants to work as the God of love. And ultimately, he gives his own self in the person of his son so that the wickedness and evil, the mega evil, the sin with a capitalist, if you like, it's more than just the accumulation of all the bad things you and I've done. It's a darker force to which we have given our power.

That is finally defeated. And see, it's very interesting in Paul's theology, when he talks about the Gentile mission going out into the non-Jewish world, Paul links that directly to the fact that the principalities and powers, as he calls them, have been overthrown. That's why he can go and say in the marketplace, you're welcome too.

And you don't have to become a Jew in order to become a Christian. You're welcome as you are because all the barriers are down because of what Jesus did on the cross. Tom Wright, thank you very much for joining me on the profile today.

And if you want to find more interesting interviews with people from all walks of life and their Christian story, do read Premier Christianity magazine and the profile is brought to you in association with that title. Again, thank you, Tom, for being with me. Well, thank you for being with us on today's edition of the program and a reminder that today's interview was from the archives of the profile podcast.

And if you want more in-depth interviews with Christians in all walks of life, it's a really great weekly podcast that you might want to subscribe to. You're looking for the profile from Premier Christianity magazine, wherever you get your podcasts from. Just a reminder that that competition is still open.

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That's all available at AskEntiright.com. In the meantime, thanks for being with us this week, and we'll see you next time. You've been listening to the Ask Anti-Write Anything podcast. Let other people know about this show by rating and reviewing it in your podcast provider.

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