

OpenTheo

#173 Will there be animals in heaven? (replay)

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

From June 2020. Tom answered listener questions on heaven and new creation. Will free will still exist? Do near Death Experiences tell us anything about it? Will we be reunited with our loved ones... and even our pets? • Subscribe to the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast: <https://pod.link/1441656192> • More shows, free eBook, newsletter, and sign up to ask Tom your questions: <https://premierunbelievable.com> • For live events: <http://www.unbelievable.live> • For online learning: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/training> • Support us in the USA: <http://www.premierinsight.org/unbelievableshow> • Support us in the rest of the world: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/donate>

Transcript

Before we get into today's show, I want to share some good news. I've mentioned that Premier Insights Financial Year ends on June 30th and that we are needing to meet a gap in funding of \$135,632 by June 30th. The great news is that another challenge grant of \$5,000 has been offered for the final push.

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(music) The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

(music) Hello and welcome to Ask NT Wright Anything. I'm Peter Byram.

This week we're replaying an episode from June 2020. Tom answers listener questions on heaven and new creation. Will free will still exist? Do near-death experiences tell us anything about it? Will we be reunited with our loved ones and even our pets? Do visit premierunbelievable.com for more content and you can register there for access to the whole website and for our newsletter which will give you updates and exclusive content as well.

So that's premierunbelievable.com.

(music) Will you join us again for another edition of the show as we ask your questions. This week about new creation and some questions about animals and heaven and the phrase heaven I'm sure will come into question as well. Given that we are going to be talking about pets and animals I was wondering if you ever had pets or anything common in your house? Not much.

When my kids were younger they went through a rabbit phase. As I've heard people say in other contexts they were nice when they came and they were nice when they went. It was nice when they went.

There was some good stuff about that but because of allergies in the family etc we never had either cats or dogs and that's just the way it is. I'm sometimes jealous of people who do because it looks fun and interesting in another dimension and likewise we've never been in the position where we could have you know ponies for the kids or whatever we've just never done that. I have to say we're a similar sort.

The pets that we have at home are the least take the least amount of work you can imagine. They're two leopard geckos and they're native to Pakistan but they live in a little vivarium in our and you can go away for a week and not worry about them because they store all this fat in their tail and as long as they've got water they're fine and you just feed them once or twice a week with live grasshoppers. That's what we put in.

It's great fun watching them stalk their prey when they do it but they're very low maintenance and that works well for us. Our lives don't really extend to having a high maintenance sort of pets. That's our perspective on this but many people are very attached to their pets and animals almost like extended families so we'll come to some of those questions later.

But let's start off because you're well known Tom for your work on what's often called new creation a new way of understanding what that kingdom is to come how we're meant to understand the language of heaven and so on. But here's someone who I suspect is rather at the beginning of starting to grapple with your work here Priscilla in Michigan has got in touch says I'm 72 and the older I get and the more I'm worried about dying. I've always believed in heaven and I would have me at home by the sea with all my dogs and loved ones but how do I know for real when I die I will enter heaven.

Where is everyone that has died are they still alive somewhere? I have a friend who's an atheist and believes death is the end of us. I don't believe that. Everyone tells me I have to have faith and because it says to do so in the Bible.

I've read the Bible I know what it says but it's God going to punish me for questioning why can't my dead loved ones communicate and tell me where they are am I losing my

faith. There's a lot of stuff wrapped up there and Priscilla's question but an overall sense of sure obviously being a bit scared of what's actually on the other side and what does she how can she know she'll be safe and absolutely like I want to say to Priscilla you're only a few months older than me and these are perfectly good questions you're not losing your faith and God is certainly not going to punish you for questioning God has given us minds to inquire and although as GK Chesterton said the purpose of an open mind is like the purpose of an open mouth namely to shut it again on something solid. So let's see if there's something solid in here and though you obviously have read the Bible the trouble with so many Bible readings in our day in the Western world as I go on saying is that we assume that the question is about what happens to me after I die and is there a place called heaven and will I get there but the whole point of the Bible Old Testament and new is that the God who made the world wants to bring heaven and earth together and to come and live with us in that new creation.

So the point is not to leave this world and go to somewhere called heaven the point is that with Jesus and through his spirit heaven has come to earth and is if you like colonizing earth though earth is a bit recalcitrant and difficult and etc etc and the point about the ultimate promises such as the end of revelation about the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth is not that we go upstairs but that God's reality comes down to meet us so that we have to think in terms of a biblical forward look in which there is ultimate new creation which is a heaven and earth combination a total transformation of everything and then in between our death and that new creation there is a mystery and the Bible is very reticent about that mystery so it's not surprising that people find it difficult to grapple with what happened and really part of the conditioning of Priscilla and many many others like her and I meet this if I take a funeral and people say what I want to know is where is she now where is she now because in the Middle Ages they believed in purgatory in the western world anyway they believed that when people died almost everyone went into a place of of purgation where they were cleaned up which was very painful and difficult and it might last a long time and then eventually you might be allowed into heaven and the reformers in the 16th century said no no no that that's a Catholic myth just to just to keep you in your place and to stop you being bad actually death finishes everything that is wrong with you so that after death and they said then you'll go straight to heaven so as car bark the great 20th century theologian said the reformers never really sorted out their eschatology they never really figured out how resurrection relates to the medieval vision of heaven and the problem is with the medieval vision of heaven which we have then tried to do in a different way in western Protestantism so I want to say God will make a new creation in which the present creation and everything it is beautiful and powerful and lovely and glorious in our present world will be transformed and enhanced and celebrated in new ways that at the moment we can only just begin to glimpse though we do see it a bit through the experience of human love through art through music etc and so Priscilla's lovely thing about wanting a home by the sea with all my dogs and loved ones yeah I get that but

actually what we're told is that after death if we are believers in Jesus we will be with Christ which is far better and that's about it Paul says in 2nd Corinthians 5 something about being away from the body and at home with the Lord but actually longing not to be disembodied but to be re-embodied says not to be unclothed but to be more fully clothed and to give Priscilla her credit there whatever she means by that phrase I'd love to have me at home by the sea with all my dogs she's recognizing that I like this aspect of reality I don't quite want to be a disembodied angel floating in a spiritual realm and I think today there's a big reaction against traditional views of heaven of just sitting on a cloud playing a lot forever and ever you know there was the far side cartoon about the guy sitting there sitting there sitting here watching a board of magazine and yes there are many atheists who believe that death is the end that's an ancient worldview goes back to Epicurus and others in the ancient world and humanly speaking when you see a body either going through cremation or whatever it looks as though that's it and part of the message of the gospel which goes has deep roots throughout scripture is that actually know the love of God is more powerful than death itself and that in Jesus we see that reality which is spoken of in the Old Testament coming to life but then how we talk about the life between human death and human resurrection remains but I'm speaking very mysterious there are different images of which being with Jesus is probably the best one and in John 14 Jesus talks about many dwelling places and that's a way of saying it's going to be okay I will look after you you may not you we don't have language at the moment to talk about how he will look after us and the New Testament interestingly never talks about a soul which goes to heaven Jewish writers did but the New Testament doesn't do that well we're going to ask you to sort of try and have a guess what that foggy signposts are that have pointed into what that might look like because people inevitably have questions about sure what this future new creation how it will be manifest what it might look like and the shelled of it actually comes in with two questions here I'll go for the resurrection of the dead questions says look if my body has decayed and my atoms have gone on to become other things plants even other people and inanimate objects how will I be reconstituted what is essentially me in this new resurrection yeah yeah it's a wonderful question and this question was faced in more or less exactly those terms in the second century AD and second and third century Tertullian discusses it and Origin discusses it and much later CS Lewis picks it up in his book Miracles and he says hey you know just as fingernails and hair and skin itself is all in a process of flux it was it was news to me when I read Lewis for the first time that our bodies change their entire molecular kit roughly every seven years you know I am not the same person physically at all that I was when I became professor in St Andrews ten years a bit like that old philosophical puzzle about a boat leaves port and goes into another one a year later and in the meantime every single part of the boat is fitted while it's here and is it the same boat that arrives grandfathers old spade that's had you know three new handles and two new blades whatever the same is the same spade and the answer and Lewis has a lovely image he says we are to that extent like the curve in a waterfall there is continuity of form but discontinuity of matter matter is pouring through

us and so it's not a big deal for God to say oh now didn't you want to own that molecule and this molecule will be better any of you took that to his literal conclusion they would have to be seven versions of you because of all the molecules that make you up exactly and and this stuff is all shared around sure you know we've got some grapes and bananas and bread on the on the table here and they use molecules which have been circulating and doing different jobs and so on and that's how it is and if we're to believe in resurrection we are believing in new creation that God will give us an appropriate body which will be clearly and recognizably ourselves but much more so the image that I've often used is based on to Corinthians 5 is that you if you meet somebody who's been very sick you might say oh poor old son so it's just a shadow of his former self but the point is if you are in Christ and dwelt by the spirit you are right now just a shadow of your future self that there is a real you which is much more like you a kind of a vivid in color and so on version of you and presumably which Christ in his resurrected state gives us an image of of course which is why the resurrection appearances are so extraordinary because at the one hand it is clearly Jesus but at the other hand it seems to be changed one of the most mysterious things in John twenty two is when John says none of them did ask him who are you because they knew it was the Lord you know they've been with him night and day for three years they knew him perfectly well they knew him better than I know you but there's a sense that it's you but but you're different and yet obviously physical too they were absolutely paid to buy that out oh yes very much so because they eat some ghostly exactly exactly and this is the mystery of new creation it's a heaven plus earth reality and for us it's very difficult to think of immortal physicality everything around us you know these microfilters papers table you could break it all down but actually there will be an immortal physicality the sort of scientist in me my dad's a biochemist wants to ask will that mean that in some way the rules of physics change in this new creation I don't know I don't know it's a fancy yeah and those are perfectly fair questions but I don't think we really know no here's here's another interesting one from Michelle I'll give her two bites of the cherry free will and love on the new earth what will stop people from hurting others in this new and renewed world if there is still free will which is required for meaningful love when people will be free to sin what will make us different from the first humans who were given an opportunity to sin and chose to do so yeah yeah the book of revelation seems to me to address this when it talks about Satan being released from bondage for a short time and then finally being thrown into the into the lake of fire it's a way of saying we can imagine the possibility that it would just be a cycle going round and round and we'd sin again etc but actually God is going to take care of that and I think the problem there lies with the art with the with the understanding of free will that when I truly love somebody it's the most free thing that I do and in a true relationship of love there is wonderful freedom but the freedom is not freedom to hurt them to slap them in the face to mistreat them that's an abuse of freedom not the use of freedom and I think I want to say there is a genuine freedom which isn't the random freedom of I can do what I like but it's actually free to be who we truly are so that there will be a true sort of freedom but which will be expressed

in an infinite variety of creativity I mean unfreedom would mean we're just on a treadmill going round and round freedom doesn't mean unfreedom because sin is not is not freedom sin is a form of slavery and so the notion of free will is a bit more complicated than we normally think but I think therefore in the new world what we will be and who we will be will be a glorious expression of the infinite creativity of God's love I just wanted to remind you that premiere insight depends fully on wonderful friends like you to make its programming possible as I mentioned earlier we are facing a funding gap of 135 thousand six hundred and thirty two dollars as we come to the end of our financial year on June the 30th the great news is that another challenge grant of five thousand dollars has been offered for this final push so please do give your best gift today knowing that it will be doubled by an additional five thousand dollars challenge grant you can give now at premiere insight dot org slash nt right that's premiere insight dot org slash nt right thank you so so much here's another sort of practical question about what what exactly heaven is Brett in Atlanta Georgia says thanks for all your work especially the books and by the way I should always say if you ever don't hear me quoting people introducing their their question with I love you Tom and thank you for everything it's usually because I've just had a good time we can assume that everyone is a big fan but anyway question though what do you think of people's near death experiences where they claim to have seen heaven do you think it's possible they have seen and experienced the heavenly realm some of the people who claim these stories are quite credible in their work lives and highly educated and adamantly stick to their stories we've seen actually quite a few books published along this idea of someone who claims to have died had some near death experience seen some vision of heaven so yeah what do you make of those and how does that relate if it is credible to to the new creation I had a people when I was teaching in Canada who had been working with their Canada because during the war he'd been an airline pilot a fighter pilot and had been shot down and was clinically dead and it had an experience like that where he almost went and was then actually told you've got to come back at what things used to do so he went and then worked for the airline but it always knew that when he'd finished raising his family he was going to go into ministry and he was about to be made a vice president of Canada and he went into the office and said no handing in my noses and I was teaching him New Testament Greek what chap at the age of 40 or something it obviously gone to purgatory well it was quite difficult at that age but I mean for him this was a moment of vocation yes and I have apps in no reason to doubt that but what I want to say is we are not ideally we are given in this life a kind of actual portrait of what the future will be I think there are moments and people who have ministered more than I have with people on their deathbeds will say that very often somebody who is lingering between life and death seems to be experiencing something of seeing and meeting people it's impossible to tell I think in terms of psychology and physiology whether that is simply the fantasies of a mind that is actually close to death or whether it is actually a reality I'm perfectly happy to say that God can use even the fantasies of a diseased and sick brain to reveal things to people why not so I don't want to say this then enables us to say this validates

the normal Western assumptions about heaven but I want to say yes it may well be that God is giving these people a vision that whatever happens to them he will love them it'll be wonderful he will look after them there is a whole new world waiting but it shouldn't be allowed to undermine the biblical teaching which is not about going to heaven but about new creation and that's the danger that these stories are just there it is so just wait around for death because it's all going to be glorious afterwards it reminds me of that moment in you'll have to give me the exact Bible reference but is it Paul who says I knew a man who talked about being taken in crisis with his 12 yes yes and people think that probably was Paul probably eluded himself in but that's a vision it wasn't a fine no it wasn't what we would call a near death experience but yes Paul is rather keen to say yeah I know a chap to whom and by the way I'm not allowed to tell you what he saw and he heard words but I'm not allowed to tell you what he that's a way of saying to the Corinthians don't get fixated on this stuff right amazing visions happen and yes I've actually had some but the most important thing was I got the thorn in the flesh yes no I get that good okay here's another interesting take on this and I'm not expecting you to read the book or seen the TV series in fact I've read the book a long time ago but not actually caught up with the TV series and Tim in Atlanta Georgia says I've read your book Tom Evil and Justice of God three times and taught an adult formation class on it at my church but recently I watched the series on Amazon Good Omen's based on a book by Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett while beautifully done as a piece of fiction it draws heavily on Christian eschatology the overarching theme of the series is that the world is pretty much okay as it is and evil does not need to be defeated in the end because that would actually destroy the world and all the good things in it does Tom have any opinion on the series or words of advice for people who want to discuss the problem of evil or eschatology with those who think the world is okay the way it is I'm gonna assume you haven't read the book or seen the series I'm afraid I haven't I don't want you a lot of stuff on screens and I haven't read the book but it seems to me that to those who have even a short memory and my memory only goes back to the middle of the 20th century but anyone who could remember most of the 20th century would just say you got to be kidding you know we have seen immense evil the first world war when you when you look at what happened and why it happened and how it worked out it really does seem to be more than the sum total of all the foolish actions and decisions of all the people involved seems to have been a rushing together of folly blindness inhumane stuff etc and then when you look at the 1930s and see both what was going on in the Soviet Union and what was going on in Nazi Germany and then you say the world is basically alright as it is as though a little bit more education and will all be alright you know I'm sorry but there are there are deep things wrong in the world the rise of Islamism as a modern phenomenon it's not like ancient Islam it's Islamism that has all sorts of signs of a deep sickness which is partly a response to the arrogance of Western culture etc etc and we're wrestling with enormous issues we were talking in a previous episode about climate change and so on I find it extraordinary that anyone would say the world is pretty much okay as it is now of course if you then swing the other way and produce a

very negative eschatology where everything is going horribly wrong and we're all about to die etc there was a hang on hang on there is beauty there is justice there is love there is life there is laughter yes there is but let's have the full picture of both yeah please I mean I get the sense and I'm trying to cast my mind back to reading the book but the part of the question is this idea that actually well evil and suffering is kind of part and parcel of what this world is and so you don't expect it to suddenly all be that's you know made better as though we can somehow yes yes yes no I get that and and of course that's part of the ancient philosophy called stoicism where and it's also part of what people like Leibniz said in the in the 17th century that this is the best of all possible world so get used to it right and various of the enlightenment philosophers look back at that and say is this really the you know Voltaire's complaint is this really the best of all possible worlds and and Voltaire quoted the Lisbon earthquake so so this is this is the sort of thing that happens in the best of all possible worlds that just on the day when everyone goes to church there's a massive earthquake and they all get crushed by falling buildings what's that about and so this discussion is a secular analog of the Christian debates about providence and the way that God runs the world and that's always been quite a big question for Christian theologians that if God is the creator then why is the world like this and to draw back and say well it's all part of a bigger pattern if that was so why did Jesus weep at the tomb of Lazarus you know you've got to have a worldview which has room for the tears of Jesus at the grave of his friend even though Jesus knows that he's prayed for him and he's going to raise him from the dead and the rich density of that double experience in the gospels I think has got to be a feature and that that's painful to hold on to it we would like to be able to say oh well it'll all work out it'll all pan out but actually that's trivializing I wouldn't dare say that to somebody who was just recently bereaved or whatever yeah we will get to animals in heaven but the one thing that I wanted to ask and other people have asked in regard to this this way of seeing the new creation and and the fact that at one level we are working towards that we're being part of God's new creation plan in the way we do our work do our ask you know we're wanting to bring that future into the present if you like but to what extent is it dependent on us and to what extent is it dependent on God who will ultimately bring everything together I mean I've even heard some people sort of take your theology and take it a bit further and say well actually whatever the new creation is will be the ones creating it it'll be some kind of where we finally get the technology right and we can all live in a kind of abundant world and it doesn't involve any supernatural intervention in sense it's all from our own efforts yeah we'll get there again this is the trouble that we divide things into natural supernatural which is again sorry to miss and go crack grammar from record this is an 18th century fancy that you've got natural and supernatural never the train shall meet in the middle ages the word supernatural always meant things which are meshing with the natural world but in which God seems to be doing something more and greater than he normally does but it's not either or it's both working together and there's been all sorts of mistakes and muddles when you pull those apart so I want to say even if it was true that when God finally does his new creation it'll

be us who are doing it that would be because God by his spirit is at work in and through us part of the problem here is that we've not really been trinitarian in our thinking that actually so many of these debates go back to the 18th and 19th century when theology was really all about who is God the creator who is God the father and then maybe you bring in Jesus if you can and maybe if you're lucky you bring in the spirit as well we've got to be more robustly trinitarian and say God does what God wants to do and quite a lot of what God wants to do in the world and for the world he wants to do through wise obedient human beings how do wise obedient human beings get to be wise obedient human beings through the work of the spirit based on the death and resurrection of Christ so that ultimately it shouldn't be an either or Paul says I worked harder than all of them but it wasn't me it was the grace of God that was with me we have to go on saying both of those things and it strikes me that whatever that new creation will look like I mean in a sense God proactively bringing people back into this new creation to be part of it in some physical sense yeah inevitably requires something that I'm guessing is going to go beyond our human ingenuity at some point of course of course but of course just just like Easter itself is a shock but but I mean there is a sense that you need to go back to the road to Emmaus and the two who are so sad and and these women have told us they've seen a vision of angels who say is alive but of course you don't believe that stuff and Jesus says how foolish you are you just haven't read the text and tells them a story again and it's a of course and I think in the new day when it dawns there will be that both hands there will be oh dear it's all gone horribly wrong and then suddenly oh my goodness if only we'd had our eyes opened all along let's finally get to do all dogs go to heaven the classic question but it's a serious one yeah yeah as I said at the beginning people you know for many people their animals their pets are like part of the family of course they are um I've got a couple of people asking similar questions cadence says what do you think about animals in heaven will pets and wildlife be recognizable on the new earth yes or will God create them in you what does the Bible say about this and William in Seattle brings it down to earth and Erwin I have an 11 year old very tenderhearted little girl whose dog recently died her good friend told her that animals don't have souls so she would not see her dog again in heaven she asked me if that was true and I don't know what to tell her while this is not one of those deep theological questions you tend to tackle an answer to give my grieving daughter would be greatly appreciated yeah the Bible says as far as I'm aware absolutely nothing about this particular question partly because this is asked in a very modern framework and particularly the question of whether dogs have souls I mean the idea of the soul is a platonic idea which you don't find in the New Testament in that form so from that point if you we don't have souls in that sense when the Bible talks about soul as applied to us the word *sukei* soul in Greek refers to the Hebrew word *nephesh* which is more like what we would mean by a person or a personality the real me so I think I want to say something like this that when a human being loves and cares for an animal and when that animal responds to that love and care there is a bond between them which is part of who that human being is just as when somebody loves God there is a bond between

them and God which we call the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit looks after that person until the resurrection and I don't see any reason at all while looking after that person shouldn't include incorporating by a kind of overflow of grace a looking after of the animals birds whatever that person has loved and brought joy to in this life so you could start the question from the other end and say if God the creator made a world which included giraffes and whales and grasshoppers and and all these crazy things fancy making a world with all these weird and wonderful creatures is it likely that the new creation would be sort of boring and flat and wouldn't have creatures like that in it seems to me far more likely that there will be an abundance of all sorts of creatures being gloriously themselves and sharing in all kinds of relationships with God's human creatures and that in the middle of that there will be a little girl or perhaps an older woman by then who will recognize among the plethora of delighted creatures a dog to whom she gave love and and companionship and who returned that favor I don't see why that shouldn't be so well I hope that's given some comfort and may do to your 11-year-old daughter William these are big questions and in a sense we engage our imagination as we begin to of course peer into the fog of wine or what that new creation might be but it's been really fun to do it with you today Tom thank you very much thank you and thanks again for all of your questions again you'll hear the ways to get in touch with the show if you want to ask more of your own on future editions of the program but we'll see you again next time thank you thanks for being with us on today's edition of the show do come back next time for questions on the apostle Paul which of course is a strength of Tom's particularly so we're looking forward to hearing some of the questions you've asked and the answers that Tom will be giving thanks very much for being with us on today's edition of the show and we'll see you next time

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