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#168 Questions on the life of St Paul, justification and predestination

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

From 2019: Tom Wright talks to Justin about his book Paul: A Biography and takes listener questions on 'justification', election and salvation and what three things he would ask Paul if he were alive today.

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Transcript

[MUSIC] The Ask NtRight Anything podcast.

[MUSIC] Hello, and welcome to Ask NtRight Anything. I'm Ruth Jackson, and today we're looking back to when Tom Wright released one of his most popular books, Paul, A Biography.

Tom talked to Justin Blyley about the book and took listener questions on justification, election, and salvation. He also spoke about what three things he would ask Paul if he were alive today. So let's join them for this classic episode of Ask NtRight Anything.

Don't forget, if you want to ask NtRight Anything, then subscribe to our newsletter at

PremierUnbelievable.com. And we'll send you the link to submit your questions, as well as giving you access to hours of bonus content. Well, here we are again, Tom, meeting over, coffee, and croissants, and orange juice, and just having a good old chat. I am incredibly privileged to be able to record these with you, these podcasts where we look at a variety of themes.

I have no shame in saying I am a quote-unquote fanboy of yours. That's the modern terminology. So you've been writing and researching Paul for decades now, haven't you? Yes.

I mean, the last, well, a couple of years ago I had you on when you wrote your magnum opus, which was... That's actually amazing. That's five years ago. That was... That came out.

Yeah, it's extraordinary. It's gone through... To the two volumes, sort of very accurate. Paul and faithfulness of God, yes, yes.

And is this really, I suppose, in a sense, the popular level version of what you wrote then? Well, sort of yes and no. When I did that big book, several people, both including colleagues in the discipline, said, "Wish you'd do a shorter one." Of course, part of the point of the longer one was that I've been writing shorter things and articles, and people had always said, "Yeah, but you didn't explain this." Or, "Yes, but surely that has to be contextualized there." "Okay, you want the big thing? Here it is." And then, of course, they all said, "Oh, it's far too long." So Jesus said, "We danced for you and you wouldn't sing." And he wept and he wouldn't mourn. But this isn't exactly a potted-down version, because that was a book on Paul's books.

Paul's mind and theology. Now, there's a lot of mind and theology in here, but part of the whole point of it is that what Paul was thinking and saying was contextualized in a rich, multi-layered life, which was to do with both his Jewish upbringing and his amazing knowledge of the Jewish scriptures, and with his contextualizing in the Roman world where he was a citizen, and in the Greek world where he knew his Epicureans from his Stoics. And we see Paul navigating these things in a multi-layered way, which I find just perpetually enthralling, because I grew up with a Paul who was basically a brain box who said prayers, as it were, and then the rest of it was off on the side.

And the older I've got, the more the whole man speaks to this whole man, and that's been really exciting. You probably feel like you know his era almost as well as you know your own now. Well, let's put it like this, my students mock me because when I say the war, I mean the Jewish Roman war of 66 to 70, not World War I or II.

And they say, "Well, yeah, I sort of mentally live in the first thing. I've tried to diversify more recently and get back towards our day as well." And just kind of give us a sense of how you structure this particular, because you've called it Paul a biography, and in that

sense you are trying to write something that's sort of a narrative of his life. It's not a sort of academic book in the traditional sense.

No, it's not at all. I mean the only footnote. So basically references to bits of the Bible or bits of classical sources and so on.

So there's no discussion of other scholarly views, or if I do say there are various views here, I don't actually go into detail as to said it. You can find those elsewhere. So this is going through from what we know about, or can infer about his early life, and how he got to the point where he was on the road to Damascus, when dot dot dot, and then what happened next.

And as with virtually all ancient history, there are gaps, and that's quite normal, but when you have gaps in any narrative, ancient or modern, what you can do is probe cautiously from either side, as it were, the bits you do know, and say, "Well, it's possible this. It's likely that, or it's almost certain that, such and such." And that's what I tried to do to construct something of a gift to us 2000 years later, that he was obviously a prolific letter writer. Well, he comparatively prolific, but actually the letters are short.

How many volumes do we have of Cicero's letters in the lab class? And they're fascinating. And they shared a flood of light on all sorts of things in first-century BC Roman culture. But for Paul, we've just got these snippets, because he's writing on the go.

He's not leisure sitting there with all day to compose. He's really sending bulletins from the front, as it were. And so most of his time, he isn't writing letters so far as we know.

He's talking with people, he's preaching, he's praying, he's trying to organize these little communities. And then from time to time, he has to buzz off a letter to somebody. We're kind of going to just sort of go with some of the questions that have come in today.

And if people want the full story, they can read Paul's biography or any of the other many books on Paul that you've written over the years. Let's start with the topic of justification, because that's where a lot of people encounter what you are saying about Paul and what he had to say on that particular issue. Keith in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, says, "I've always wanted to know how Enter Wright would explain his understanding of justification to a local rural church congregation where people aren't as versed in the various schools of Pauline interpretation." Well, this is a good opportunity, I think, just to perhaps unpack for show casual listener in simple enough terms what you mean, what you think Paul meant by justification and how that's commonly been in your view.

Yes, it's slightly frustrating because this word simple. I've written one or two books with the word simple or simply in the title, and one of my publishers said to me once, "Tom, I

have to sit you down and explain the meaning of simply." And I said, "Listen, if somebody comes to me in St Andrews where I work and says, 'Tell me how to get to Glasgow and keep it simple.' I could say, 'Just keep heading west and a bit south and you can't miss it.' But it might be kind to tell him that there's a big river which is several miles wide and that there's a mountain range and that there's this way round or that way round and you might get in a mess. So forgive the complexity, but sometimes it is actually necessary for the sake of getting you to where you need to go.

I think if I were faced with that with a congregation that had never really thought it through, what I'd like to do is to take them to Galatians chapter 2 and say, 'Let's just sit with Galatians 2 and maybe even do some role play as to what's going on in the church in Antioch.' Because this is the first time that Paul talks about justification and we presume that this makes sense, you know, I want to bring in Romans and Philippians as well eventually, but not yet. And in Galatians what's going on is there's a crisis because Jews and Gentiles are sharing fellowship in the Messiah, sharing table fellowship together as Christians with no distinction between them. And then some people come from Jerusalem and say, 'Shouldn't be doing this.

Gentiles, you're not supposed to be at the same table as Jews and so please go away.' And/or the Jews separate themselves. And when Paul is talking about justification, that is the presenting issue. And our trouble with reading Galatians 2 is that because we have in our traditions justification is, 'I'm a sinner, I need to get to heaven, so I need to be justified in order for that to happen.' We import that back into Galatians 2 and we forget what was actually going on.

And the point is that God in Christ has dealt with the sin problem, not so that we can go to heaven, but so that God by His Spirit can live in our midst, and so that we can be the family of God together, because the reason Jews didn't eat with Gentiles is that they were regarded as unclean, as automatically sinners, because they were outside the law. They were idolaters, etc. And the point of the gospel for Paul is that what has happened on the cross means that anyone who is in Christ has had their sin and evil and all that dealt with, so that then there is no reason why Christians didn't sit down.

So justification is God's declaration that all those who are in the Messiah are part of the same family and that their sins are forgiven. And it's not in that sense a transactional thing as it was sometimes presented by the Reformers. What then happened? This was an answer to the question, how might you start it off with the finished congregation? I would get them to wallow in Galatians 2 until they got the message, and then they might want to go into Galatians 3 as well, which is about the covenant with Abraham, etc.

Sooner or later I would want to take them through Philippians 3, which is a similar thing, but with Paul's autobiography being very central, where I had all these Jewish privileges, but I abandoned them for the sake of the Messiah, etc. Sooner or later I would want to

get to Romans, and in Romans and only in Romans, justification is reframed within a law court setting. What has happened in the Christian tradition is that people have taken the law court setting from Romans, have forgotten the covenantal and familial settings which were the original location in Galatians, and constructed a whole extra thing based only on a law court setting, and have then tried to work out how it works, and particularly they've tried to do so out of Romans 1 to 4 without Romans 5 to 8, but actually the argument of Romans on justification is 1 to 8, with then coming through to 9 to 11, and the whole strand of what this means for God's worldwide purposes in and through Israel, and then 12 to 16.

So it's more complicated. If you start with the post-Luther questions, then okay, we can have great fun going through the 16th, 17th century through to the 21st, different theories of how people get justified, all with a law court with either imputed righteousness or imparted righteousness or whatever. And I know what those questions are about.

They can be extremely helpful, partially, but they can also be extremely puzzling. I believe that the Bible itself is the place to start. This is the great irony that Luther was saying, the Bible, the Bible, the Bible, but actually often his followers have forgotten.

Well, they go to Luther and they go to subsequent diminishes. Luther was quite a many-sided, rich character. He said a lot of things about a lot of things, and I don't think actually he would have radically disagreed with me about Galatians.

He might have done a bit. But already in 1955, in one of the volumes of Church Dogmatics, called Luther on his misreading of Galatians. Very interesting.

So there's all sorts of issues then. But again, it's comparatively simple if you start with the Bible and allow the Bible to tell you how you should use these words. But the problem is when a word that is in our translations of the Bible cuts loose and gets on a tradition of its own, then when people start there, they assume that what the Bible said means, what we've made that word mean, and again and again, that ain't necessarily so.

And this is sometimes called the New Perspective on Paul. Although I'm sure you would say, well, it's the original perspective. And Douglas in Gibraltar says, "In the light of your understanding of the New Perspective on Paul and your reading of Romans, how would you lead someone to faith in Christ?" Now, that's a much bigger question, I suppose.

But I suppose the question at the heart of it is something that was relatively simple maybe to present as a, "Here's how to become a Christian and have your sins forgiven." Suddenly looks a little bit more complex or not as quite as simple to explain in that. Yes, and obviously people have taken Romans, chapters 1 to 4, and have referred to it as the Romans Road and have said, "Here you are, you're a sinner, Christ died for your sins, so now, dot, dot, you can go to heaven." Of course, what they don't usually say is, "So now

according to Romans 4, you're part of Abraham's family." That's not... Does that all make it into the script? Exactly. But when you find yourself telling a story which then doesn't actually quite square with what's in the text, you should beware.

So I would say, "Sorry, we need to complexify. We have oversimplified, and we have misreadromes. And if the question is, "How do you lead somebody to Christ?" Then again, as I said before in answer to an earlier question on another podcast, it depends entirely who they are, where they're coming from, what their background is, how much they know already.

I would, in all sorts of ways, much rather, walk with them through one of the Gospels with Mark or John, say, "Let's just live with this, and let's look at this person, Jesus. And let's ask the questions about what is his kingdom, why did he die, who is he, etc. If in the course of that issues come up about God's whole plan, by all means let's read Romans.

But Romans is like, you know, Romans is like climbing the North Wall of the Iga. It's a wonderful, spectacular thing, and the view from the top is unmatched, but it's a tough climb. And if you think it's actually going to be a simple Sunday afternoon stroll, then you may slip around from time to time.

If it were to be boiled down into a phrase or something that you could give in simple terms, are we inviting people to become part of God's family in Christ essentially? That's the invitation that we're giving when we... That is the invitation, and that is how great many people do become Christians, because they realize this is a family, and it's a loving, generous, outgoing, cheerful family, and they want to be part of it. But do you have to have, as it were, if you like, signed on the dotted line of a number of things, I believe Jesus died for me. Yes, he died for my sins, rose again, so on.

This is all the basic baptismal things, and I have taken many baptisms and confirmations, and I've explained to congregations that the reason we say the creed during that is that this is the badge we wear, that when I confirm somebody, and perhaps tie somebody, say, we're not welcoming this person to the family because they're male or female or because of the color of their skin or because they're rich or poor or anything, the only badge we wear is the badge of what we believe. And that's justification by faith, actually, that we are not defined by our background, by our ethnicity, by our previous moral background. We are justified in Christ.

Paul says three times Romans 3, Philippians 3, Galatians 2, we are justified in the Messiah. In other words, when God looks at us, he doesn't see us as we are, he sees us in Christo, in the Messiah, and the Messiah has died. Therefore, we've left all that behind, and that takes a lifetime to work out what that then means, but that is justification by faith.

Let's open up another massive can of worms then. Staying in Romans, I suppose, Devon

in Old Oxford Surrey says, are we elected/chosen by God? Is our salvation all by grace? Or do we have to make a choice? Or do we have to make a choice? How can that be grace? All the classic questions. I'm very confused, says Devon.

How do you try and present this simply? This is, of course, a classic theological problem that became very sharp edged at certain points in the Reformation, though it actually goes back way behind that, and Augustine and Aquinas and so on. They believe very clearly that some people were chosen by God, and some people seemed not to be. Part of the problem here is that the language of election is very much Israel language.

It goes back to Deuteronomy and to the call of Abraham. And when the New Testament is retrieving that, it's retrieving something which isn't primarily about how this person gets saved, but the way in which God is using this, what we've called before, the scandal of particularity, to reach out into the world. And that Jesus himself is the elect.

He is the chosen one. This sounds for a moment very like Karl Barth that we are chosen in him. And Paul says that in Ephesians 3, we're chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world.

But Israel's election, which is what that's modeled on, was always for the sake of the world. He has major parting of the ways here that there are some who will say God chose the Jewish people so that they would be his people, and then he seems to have extended it. But actually, the point is in Genesis 12 and Genesis 15, Genesis 17, Genesis 20, the promises to Abraham are promises through Abraham for the world.

And you see that in the Psalms particularly, where in Psalm 2, Psalm 72, etc. The Messiah, the coming king, is the one through whom God's promise blessing to Abraham will extend to the ends of the earth. And chosenness means chosen to carry this promise forward.

But that chosenness doesn't in that sense, though, mean God has pre-selected a select group of people who will believe in him and be in the kingdom. That is part of the mystery. And when you get to Romans 8, 28, 29, 30, there is a sense that Paul is saying something which sounds a bit like that.

But again, Romans 8 is all about the true climax of the Israel story in the Messiah. And the whole point is it's for the whole creation. So if we are shaped according to the pattern of the Messiah, the minute we think, "Oh, so we've been chosen, so we're special, so that's fine." We've missed the point because it's so that we are the ones through whom the world will be redeemed.

Now, I'm not universalist. That doesn't mean everyone will be saved. It means I don't think actually that passage Romans 8, 28 to 30 is trying to answer the questions that Calvin and the others who followed him were addressing.

When we hear a word like predestination, I think we often read into it. Of course. And we trip over as well because there have been major philosophical debates about determinism and free will.

And the Christian debates about predestination or free choice or whatever are a kind of a theological reflection of those philosophical debates. And both of the ends of that feel wrong in that we know in our bones that we're not just automata. At least we really think that.

It's very hard to imagine that we are simply running on an automatic thing. Equally, we don't want to be like random atomic particles whizzing around without rhyme or reason. Somewhere there is a balance and the philosophers struggle with that.

Here's a picture I've sometimes been given by those who want to reconcile the language of predestination and human freedom and so on. Imagine a flight that's on its way from London to New York. That flight is predestined.

It's scheduled to go there. But it's a free choice of anyone who wants to book themselves into that flight as it were. And there's this sense that all those who are in Christ as it were are on the flight.

But that doesn't mean that there isn't freedom to choose whether you are on that flight. Yes, yes. You could get away with that perhaps half way through a sermon.

I wouldn't like to argue it in a theological seminar. But I think that the fact that we reach for illustrations like that is a way of saying that we know we shouldn't get skewered on the horns of this dilemma. Because yes, Ephesians 2, "By grace you are saved through faith.

It is not of yourselves. It is the gift of God." Very clear in Paul and in John and all over. But at the same time, if we think that that means, okay, nothing for me to do, then we've misconstrued it.

Go back to Genesis 1, for goodness sake. Humans are made to be reflecting God's image. That's a vocation.

It's not. You're not just a passenger. Lerman in Canada asks Professor Wright in your book, Paul Abargrophy.

You say that Paul is striking a blow at the very heart of the Eropagus's raison d'etre when he speaks of a judgment by a resurrected man. But Paul leaves the democratic jurisprudence structure itself intact. Is it a problem for Christians with their strong sense of the Imago Dei for humanity that the Athenians were first to implement a democratic process? That's quite a big and complex question.

It's a great question. But the Athenians were and weren't democratic in our sense. I mean, of course, half the Athenian society were slaves and half of the remaining, the free Athenian society were women.

And it was only Athenian, male Athenian citizens who voted. So from our point of view, it's a rather shrunk democracy. And the Athenians may have invented it, but they did funny things with it, and it didn't last, and the different things happened.

What I would want to stress is that for the early Christians like the Jews of the same period, they looked around the world, and they saw that many countries had different systems of monarchy and of different whatever. They weren't terribly interested in how people came to power. They were much more interested in what they did with power once they'd got it.

We in the modern Western democracies, we think, for all sorts of interesting philosophical reasons going back to the 18th century and beyond, we think that voting democratically gives people a mandate to do what they want for the next term in office, because they've now been voted so they have the right to do it. And then we have real difficulty holding them to account afterwards, because the only way we have to hold them to account is not voting for them next time round. Now, the Athenians, as part of their democracy, had the system of ostracism, where if there was somebody that they really thought was a pain in the neck, and we could name various people from British public life right now, and possibly even American public life, you could have a vote and you could actually banish somebody for a significant time from the city.

Wouldn't that be nice? Well, there are other people with ostracism. Well, that's right. But the Athenians knew that they had to have some checks and balances in that system.

And then the Romans, often, after a magistrate, a consular or a consular, whatever, had their term in office, when their term of office was over, they would often be put on trial for mishandling of what they did. Now, we don't usually do that either. And maybe we should.

So when we look at the ancient democracies, we see that they knew they had to have some checks. We have abandoned that because of the 18th century ideology, which I suspect may be partly behind this question, which says that we don't believe in the divine right of kings, so God is out of the political question, so politics just makes itself like a sort of political version of Darwinian evolution. And then it goes where it goes.

And well, look at the 20th century. That's where it goes. And we ought to be saying, hang on, we need to think more wisely about how to do this.

So even though, obviously, our Christian traditions may have shaped what we now embrace in terms of democratic government and so on, that wasn't Paul's primary

purpose by any means in terms of shaping that particular way into the government. And yet what's happening with the church is that there is a multi-ethnic philanthropic, polychrome worship-based, fictive kinship group, that's a church, which is exactly what the Romans would have loved to have attained, and they couldn't do it. It's exactly what the European Union would love to attain, but has been able to.

It's exactly what America wants to attain, and it's very creaky and difficult. It shows you that simply instituting a form of government is not necessarily the answer. Exactly.

The church ought to be holding up a mirror to the world and saying, actually, we know how to do multicultural society. I wish that the church did. Final question.

Stephen, in Sacramento, California, asks, if you could go back in time and had the chance to interview Paul, what three questions would you ask him? Oh, goodness. Goodness. If you can't think of three, one or two.

Well, there are some classic passages. I still, when I read 1 Corinthians chapter 11 verses 2 following, which is about women wearing head coverings in church, I think I get what he's basically wanting to say that when women are leading in worship, they should look like women and not be pretend men, that's fine. But the argument he actually uses about the creation of man and woman and the image and so on does seem to me out of kilter with the other things he says about humans being in the image of God.

And I'd love just to tease out whether I'm missing out on something there. I spoke to someone who's written a book on that, and they go down the line that they believe he's quoting others back to this. Yes, yes.

I know that argument. I am not yet convinced by that, but since I read it, I haven't studied it in detail. I haven't been back and actually worked through the detail.

That's one thing. I think I would like to know more about his imprisonment in Ephesus. I've argued in the biography that there was definitely an Ephesian imprisonment, and that his suffering there was what caused this deep poetry of Philippians 2 and Colossians 1 and so on to emerge.

I'd love to know whether that's actually the right way of looking at that. I would like to know whether in the dark ten years after he goes back to Tarsus, whether he was ever married, whether he did have a wife and if she left him or died or whatever, we simply don't know. And he is carefully elusive about that in 1 Corinthians 7. So there are questions like that.

But of course, the main things would have to do with Jesus. Paul is a Jesus man. That's what he's most passionately interested in.

And it has come back to me who the scholar was. We were trying to rack our brains for

Lucy Pepiet. Oh, yes.

And her book I think is Women and Worship at Corinth Paul's rhetorical arguments in 1 Corinthians. So that's one place to go for more on that particular view on that. Okay.

Thank you so much for answering such a wide range of questions on Paul. Thank you. The issue of Women is timely.

We are going to be doing that in a future podcast. So look out for that as well. But for the moment, thank you so much, Tom, for being with me.

Thank you. My pleasure. Thank you for listening.

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