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#25 When Christians lose their faith

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

In the wake of two high profile Christians who have renounced their faith, Tom responds to listener questions on what defines being a Christian, whether we can lose our salvation, and what to do when a loved one cannot respond to the Gospel because of dementia.

Tom also talks about his new book 'History and Eschatology' based on his 2018 Gifford Lectures.

For 'History and Eschatology: Jesus and the promise of natural theology' by NT Wright <https://spckpublishing.co.uk/history-and-eschatology>

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Transcript

[Music] 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.

[Music] Premier Podcasts.

[Music] The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

[Music] Hello there and welcome to your fortnightly catch up with me Justin Briley of Premier and NT Wright, aka Tom Wright, the new senior research fellow over at Whitcliffe Hall at Oxford University. And this is the show where you get to ask the questions and today your questions on being a Christian and falling away from faith.

That's what we'll be exploring today on the program. Now Tom's actually currently out in the US on a tour for his new book with Mike Bird, the New Testament in its world. We talked about that on the last show with Mike.

If you're listening in time, you still might be able to get him in San Diego. He's at the ETS and SBL conferences there from the 21st to the 25th of November. And finishing it up with a special evening at Rock Church in San Diego as well.

So if you want the dates and the details, it's at newtestamentworld.com. Scroll to the bottom of that website and you've got all of the speaking dates for both Tom and Mike Bird there. If you enjoy your New Testament debates, you might want to check out a recent edition of my other podcast, The Unbelievable Podcast a few weeks ago. In a special edition of the show that we call the big conversation, I was joined by Bart Ehrman and Peter J Williams, a non-believing and believing Bible scholar debating the reliability of the Gospels.

That's proved a very popular show, both on podcast and on the video channel as well. So go and check that out if you think you might be interested. But not too much housekeeping this week.

Just to remind you, you can get bonus stuff exclusive offers, updates and of course be entered automatically into competitions for Tom's book by subscribing to the newsletter of this podcast over at askentibrite.com. For now, let's get into today's show. It's a great pleasure. We joined again by Tom here in studio.

Good to be with you. We're back with our croissons and our biscuits and bananas and grapes. We've got all the fuel we need to record today's episode of the show.

Important questions actually, to some extent, pastoral issues as we talk about being a Christian and falling away. Before we get into that, you've been very busy recently. We've already heard obviously about your large new book with Mike Byrd, The New Testament in its world.

But on your own now, you've got the official version of the Gifford lectures that you delivered probably a year and a half or more ago. It's called History in Escatology. Tell us briefly what this book is.

For those who perhaps haven't had a chance to hear or watch the Gifford lectures, what were you asked to do and how you managed to encapsulate it? I should say the phrase History in Escatology is both a good and a bad thing for this book. I showed it to

somebody who's very close to me who looked at that and said, "That's that word that I can never remember what it means." And I said, "Yeah, I know that's a problem." The word "eschatology" sounds important, but people aren't quite sure what we're talking about here. But the reason it's called that is because over half a century ago, another New Testament scholar, the famous one called Rudolf Bultman, he did the Gifford lectures and his were called History in Eschatology, but with a different subtitle.

And the publishers decided to kind of celebrate the fact that here at last was another New Testament scholar doing them. We'd give it the same title because that is what the stuff is about. But the heart of it is to say, when we're talking about natural theology, that is what happens when we look at the world that we know, can we reason to God from there? What's happened for the last 200 years is that history, the quest for knowing what actually was going on and what people were thinking, that's been bracketed out.

And I wanted to say that's no good. History in the sense of stuff that's actually happened in the real world is part of that real world. So by what right do you say that it doesn't belong with natural theology? But when you do the history of the first century and talk about Jesus, you discover that he's in a world which is talking about the coming of God's kingdom, which is eschatology that God has promised that something new is going to happen, which will transform the present world.

Eschatology is about the end, but the word end is very slippery. So it's about what did they mean by that? Did they mean the end of the world? And if not that, then what? And so it's as we do the historical task and as we look at Jesus' promise of the coming of the kingdom and what that means, what from that historical basis can we deduce about who God is? So that's how the book basically works. And I know that within that you obviously delve into all kinds of areas, but including the fact that the term supernatural is a rather modern invention in the sense that we often bracket the natural and the supernatural, even in the term natural theology, which is what the different lectures have always been about promoting.

I mean, if you were to boil that down, why wouldn't Jesus and his contemporaries necessarily have understood our use of the word supernatural? Yeah, yeah, yeah. When people look at what historians do, something like me, I'm a first century historian, basically everything else grows out of that. People sometimes accuse me and others of, quote, methodological naturalism.

In other words, oh, you're bracketing out the supernatural, because ever since the 18th century, the movement we think of as dayism, and then the hard-edged version of that, epicureanism, thinks of God as being outside our normal world, and then the word supernatural, which has a long history going back to the Middle Ages and beyond, means something different. In the Middle Ages, you had the natural world, and the supernatural world was not, in a sense, different from that. It was that God is always at work in the

natural world, and sometimes he does things which we wouldn't have expected, but it doesn't imply that God is normally absent.

Whereas in our world today, particularly, I think in America, sadly, ever since the 18th century days, supernatural means a God who is normally outside the process, reaching in, doing something weird, and then as it were going away again, and we call it, oh, it's a miracle or whatever. And that whole language of supernatural and miracle is part of the problem, and if people say, don't you believe in the supernatural? I say, no, I believe in God, the Creator God, who is always present and always active, and sometimes, quite often, actually does things that we wouldn't have expected, because why would we expect it? Because we're not God, we don't know all the realms of possibilities. So I worry when people say, oh, we must put the supernatural back in, or we must talk about the miraculous, because they're talking about interventionist deism.

And just like Christian Smith, the American sociologist, says that the implicit religion of many Americans is moral therapeutic deism, so the implicit religion I know of many Americans is a supernaturalist deism, which is a contradiction in terms, because the deist God ought to stay outside the process. But it's that that I'm trying to get at, that in the New Testament, that is not the picture of God that we find. Well, it's available now.

History in eschatology, subtitle, Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology. It is the book version of the Gifford Lectures that Tom delivered back at the beginning of 2018. So do make sure to get a whole copy.

I'll make sure that there's links from today's show as well, if you want to look at that. Turning to another subject, and these are the questions that we brought together on today's program, we're looking at what it means to be a Christian, how one would define that. And also when people leave the faith, fall away and so on.

There's been some interesting high profile stories over the summer about that, and we could maybe speak to one or two of those. But let's start out with some questions that have come in. John, who's in Connecticut, says, "I'm curious as to how you would define a Christian.

Tom, I've heard you list individuals such as Marcus Borg as Christians, while many wouldn't. Without speaking to whether or not they're saved or follows of God outside of carefully defined Christianity. Are there any core doctrines which you would say define a Christian? Is there a line that, again, without speaking to the actual heart of the individual and God's relationship with them, that you would draw between those who are Christian and those who are not?" So John's obviously wanted to make clear, he's not asking you to judge people's individual standing before God, but are there lines you would draw to say, "Okay, well, this is what it means to be Christian." As in many spheres of life, the word "normally" is a great help because you can always say, "Well, normally this is what you expect to find." And then there probably are exceptions and

slippery bits and dark areas and so on.

And actually, the late Marcus Borg died three or four years ago now, sadly, who was a good and close friend of mine, and we collaborated on a book together. And I'm still in touch with his widow, who's a dear person too. He's a good case, and I'm sure he wouldn't mind me using him as an example, because for me, I would take, say, Paul's statement in Romans 10, that if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

So it's Jesus is Lord, God raised him from the dead. Now, Marcus Borg would say he believed both of those things, and Marcus once told me in a moment of personal friendship about the fact that sometimes he would suffer from insomnia and that when he would be lying awake for a couple of hours in the middle of the night, he'd say, "I pray my own version of the Jesus prayer," and I said, "Tell me about that." And he said, "I pray slowly and repeating it again, Lord Jesus Christ, you are the light of the world, fill my mind with your truth and my heart with your love." And then again, Lord Jesus Christ, et cetera, et cetera. I remember thinking, "Anyone who prays that for two hours in the middle of the night is a Christian." Now, Marcus would then say that his belief that God raised Jesus from the dead did not involve an empty tomb or a new body or anything like that.

To that, I would say, Marcus, I think at that point you are a very muddled Christian because actually when you look at what those words meant in the first century, they did not mean a new spiritual experience or that Jesus has gone into a heavenly dimension. They are about bodies and tombs and things. Now, Marcus would have every right to reply to me that he would think, "I'm a very muddled Christian as well," and no doubt in some ways he'd be true.

He'd be right. But I think because I believe in the generous creativity of God, I would incline towards saying that somebody who has that kind of testimony, even though for various discernible reasons, he didn't want to sign on the dotted line for what I regard as essential. I cannot begin to say this man is not a genuine Christian.

And in all sorts of ways, the older he got, the more I think the love of Christ was manifest in his life. He'd had a very checkered career in his early years and been around all sorts of loops and had lost his faith and found it again in a strange way, this and that. And I think God never lost him as it were, even though coming back he wasn't able to affirm the things that I would say were important.

So that shows you where I would be on that. That I think a kind of a rigid, "You've got to say these words or you're not part of the team," probably won't do partly because I'm not God and God's business who's in and who's out. But I wouldn't want to say that in a sort of a loose open-ended, "Oh, well, all people of good will," whatever, because the centrality of Jesus is really, really, really important.

And that will shine through, seems to me, in any genuine Christianity. When you find people saying, as one writer from a previous generation says in one of his books, that maybe we're moving towards a version of Christianity in which Jesus himself plays a less central role. I feel a cold hand on my heart there.

I'm sorry that this is just not what it's all about. It becomes something that's sub-Christian or, well, or, or even just plain non-Christian. Similar but related question, Richard in Houston, Texas, says, "I've listened to hours of interviews with you, Tom, and you consistently use the phrase, "If you are a Christian," and then go on to explain a Christian's participation in the restoration of the earth, et cetera.

What I've never heard you explain is what the Christian designation really means. In other words, how does one move from a state of not being a Christian to being one? And once one becomes a Christian and has passed from death to life, as John says in chapter five, "Is there a permanent change? Almost a Christian do other things afterwards to retain that change?" So, a couple of questions. Yeah, that's a huge question, of course.

And hi, Richard. I'm glad you like the podcast, which I have fun doing. Human beings are complex creatures, and God has made us complex creatures.

And there's always a danger in any short summary of who we are and who we're meant to be that we oversimplify and miss out things that actually matter. And then you run into somebody who, personality-wise, is very different from you, and perhaps in terms of Christian tradition is very different from you, and then they just don't fit your categories and help. What are we going to do about that? So, I want to say, let's be as open-minded as possible about the multiplicity of who we are, the complexity of who we are.

Jesus taught that we should love God with our heart and mind and soul and strength. And while it's not entirely clear in any of the commonries that I know, the precise distinctions that he had in mind, we talk about the head and the heart. We talk about people whose faith is all visible in what they do, etc., etc.

And I think the answer is we probably all come in through a slightly different door or window, but once you're in this house called Faith, called the Church, called the followers of Jesus, then what we're supposed to do is explore all the other ways as well. I know some people who've come in entirely on the head trip that they've been convinced by a rational argument that Jesus was raised from the dead, "Oh my goodness, therefore there must be a God, etc." But you cannot live simply on that, or if you try, you're heading for disaster. And I think sometimes when people talk about losing their faith, it may be, and I don't know because God knows people's hearts, it may be that actually they found one bit of the Christian faith, but they never integrated the other bits.

Or for some people, it's very much a heart or a soul thing that they heard this wonderful thing, whether it's Handel's Messiah or some great hymn or something, they swept off

their feet and, "Oh my goodness, this is me, this is where I am." But they never developed it into all the other things that are going on. Now, that no doubt won't cover all cases, but I think in the New Testament, it's pretty clear that being a Christian means both baptized into the fellowship of the Messiah. The Messiah's people, the call of the church for the sake of argument, and also believing that God raised Jesus from the dead and that he is the world's Lord, which is a form of allegiance because there are other people around there who are called "kirios" Lord, particularly Caesar.

Sure. So giving up idols to serve a living God, Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 1, that's basic. There are idols all around in the ancient world, a hand in the modern world, and one has to learn to recognize them and say, "No, I'm not going that route.

There is one God, and he is revealed in his son Jesus, and I am part of that team following Jesus." But however much you say it, it's interesting that in the New Testament, though there are defining moments, there is no one single definition to which they all return. So it's got to be complex, but within that complexity again, the centrality of Jesus is absolutely paramount. Well, they ask "Enter anything podcast comes to you, courtesy of Premier in partnership with SBCK and NT Right 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 "But 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/askNTRight. I think we'll open up a couple of questions now, again that are related on that whole issue of "Can a Christian lose?" as it were.

That part of being the family of God and Christ. I've got one from here from George Hughes in Sparks, Nevada, who says, "Justine's atheist guests on Unbelievable, that's the other podcast I run." Are often self-described former Christians. Now given John 10 verses 28 to 29 and Ephesians 1, 13 to 14, perhaps you could elaborate on those time in a moment.

And other such passages on the eternal security of the believer is quote unquote "former Christian" a real category of people. Is there actually such a thing? And I'll ask this one from Shirley as well, in East Sussex, who says, "When a person is baptized and asks Jesus into their life, what happens if they later feel their faith has gone?" And they declare they're no longer a believer. I have an answer which I think is biblical, but we'll be glad to hear your response as well.

So, yeah, I mean, there's obviously those I've heard from a reformed Calvinist perspective who say, "Well, once they've always saved, and anyone perhaps who then

rejects their salvation or appears to have never actually been a Christian to begin with in some sense." And I again, on my unbelievable show where I have obviously engaged with lots of ex-Christians, people often quite offended by that because they say, "Well, if I wasn't a Christian, then no one was because I was fully committed and fully signed up." But it does leave a bit of head scratching then. Does it mean that people can sort of, at one moment, be in? And the next moment, sign themselves out again, help us to make sense of this time? Yeah, I mean, when you read the New Testament, there seem to be two strands which are held in tension. And one is very much the John 10 one.

I give them eternal life and no one shall snatch them out of my hand, or my father is greater than all and no one shall snatch them out of my father's hand. Then, of course, that does depend on, well, just who are these sheep and how do we know? And that goes with, say, Romans 8, those who justified them, who also glorified and justification is by faith so that anyone who has this basic faith believing in Jesus as Lord and risen from the dead, then that faith is the sign that God has begun the work in them. The other passage that goes with that, O Bifflepins, one where Paul says, "The one who has begun a good work and you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." And all of those are hugely encouraging that something has happened.

I do believe this belief is not something that I just rumbled up myself. It's something that God has worked in me by the Spirit. And when God begins something like that, he's going to complete it.

Simultaneously, obviously you have passages like the Hebrews where in chapter 6 and chapter 10, there are real warnings about, "Watch out because if you've tasted this gift, and then you turn again." And revile the Son of God. And it's probably in a situation of persecution where somebody is saying, "You must now curse Jesus." And people have done that. It's like that terrible and shocking and scary book, Silence in Japanese book book.

Which was made into a film. That's absolutely right. And where the whole point was to trample on this image of Jesus as a sign that you are giving it up.

And that raises all these questions. But it's not just that. It's also in Paul.

If you think of 1 Corinthians, Paul says, "I pummel my body and subdue it, lest having preached to others, I myself should be a cast away." That's scary. This is Paul himself. And I think Paul knows perfectly well that in his own heart of hearts, there is always the lure of the idols.

There is always the possibility of going back to the life he had before in his pre-Christian Jewish mode. And he sees that as a possibility which he has to guard against. And then in 1 Corinthians 10, this is the same Paul who is probably writing Philippians around the same time and is going to write Romans later.

He says, "Watch out because we're like the wilderness generation who came out of Egypt under Moses. And they were all baptized into Moses. They ate the same spiritual food, drank the same spiritual drink.

In other words, we baptize to share in the bread and the wine of the Lord's supper. Watch out. Let the one who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.

God is faithful, but you've got to make sure that you resist the relevant temptations. That is a dire warning to all of us. And I think that balance, I want to say to myself, I want to say, pastorally, that balance is so necessary because without the first half we could simply lapse into despair.

Without the second half we could easily become casual. And I think some Christians do become casual because they are taught, "Oh, you have now believed. Therefore you are going to heaven." Therefore, don't imagine that anything you can do one way or another is going to change that.

And I think it's out of that context that people then find, whether in their 20s or 30s or 50s or 70s or whatever, that things can go very dry and that there's one dimension to their faith only. And that when other things happen in other departments of their life, they haven't got the resources. I once knew a young man, lovely young man, who had been a very devout Christian, very keen Christian, and whose faith seemed to be in a very special box through his teens and twenties.

But other aspects of his life were developing in other ways. And when those other aspects grew, it looked to him as though his faith was, that was something I did when I was a teenager in my 20s. I went a lot then, but of course I've grown up now, because the faith hadn't grown along with.

And pastorally I want to say, "Anyone in that position, I don't want to give a boxed in theological analysis that this must be because you did this or you didn't do that or whatever." But there is this constant thing of following Jesus, and Jesus saying, "No, I'm still here, I'm going up ahead, it may be dark, but I want you to follow me." And if at that point you say, "Well actually, now I'm terribly busy with this," then don't be surprised if it does all go very dark. The other thing which one has to say, and some of the greatest saints and mystics have always known this, think of St. John of the Cross and people like that, many Christians have known a time of total dryness when prayer doesn't seem to mean anything, when Jesus seems to be absent and so on. And at that point, there in the Psalms you have this same thing, where are you God, what's going on? Psalm 88, "You've put lovers and friends away from me, and darkness is my only companion." And that may be a matter of physical or mental illness or depression, or it may just be that that's a dark valley through which one is called to pass.

And there is an element of suffering and lament about that, which one can't rationalize

away. And the other aspect of this, I think, that shouldn't be ignored, is the suffering and lament of those who are perhaps close to people who do step back from their faith and perhaps entirely forgo it. Because if you're married and your partner has been a believer and suddenly they lose their faith, that can have an enormous emotional toll on the other person.

Equally, there have been some well-known cases I mentioned earlier in the States, Josh Harris, Martis Amps and others, who well-known church leaders are in positions of leadership or one tool or another, and when they announce they no longer consider themselves a Christian. I think a lot of people who had sat under their ministry or seen them as role models in some way, that was very difficult for them. Perhaps people even who would trace their own beginnings in Christianity and faith to them, and then suddenly for that person to say, "I no longer believe it," that can be enormously difficult.

Yes, yes, that would be enormously challenging and difficult, and that hasn't happened to me, but I've seen it at secondhand. And of course, one's faith should never be in. I believe this because so-and-so told me, "One's faith should be in." Here it is in the Gospel, in the Bible, in the truth as it is in Jesus, and even if this person, for whom I will continue to pray and exercise love and all the rest of it, even if they say, "No longer means anything to them," well, it still does mean this to me.

I think again, in every different Christian subculture, as it were, there is that risk that you can live within this Christian subculture, you can operate within it, you can learn how to press the buttons and make things happen, and that it is possible to run on empty for some little while. Like if the car is coasting downhill, you may not notice that you run out of petrol, and that actually you should have filled up and done something about it. That's easier to say.

All sorts of different people have all sorts of different circumstances. I knew one man who's now no longer with us, who had been an Anglican priest for the first 24 or 30 years of his adult life, and then one day realized that he was going through the motions, it didn't mean anything. I wasn't close enough to him to be able to see where it was that the turn in the road had happened, but what little I know, it was that there would have been possibilities for development, for growth, for a deeper discipleship, and if you turn away from those, then you will be running on empty.

That's a very dangerous thing. I say it to myself. I say it to all of us.

We'll come to another question in a moment, but one of the things I've noticed at a popular buzzword these days is deconstruction, and a lot of, particularly evangelical Christians, I think, going through deconstruction of what were once assumed beliefs and so on. And that's, again, if you grow up with this thing, say a prayer, and now you'll be going to heaven, and that's it. I want to say, hang on, hang on, hang on.

The aim is not going to heaven. The aim is the new heavens and new earth and resurrection. You know this, but a lot of people still don't and still talk about going to heaven.

And then when people discover that it's about the kingdom coming here on this earth, transforming this world in strange ways, but of course, still with a future dimension, then that is often very difficult to take all the hymns and prayers and poems, just say what they should say. Our category is no longer quite work that we grew up with. Exactly.

And I run into this quite a lot, especially in America. And when that happens, then there may be quite a bit of dismantling. I've had people say, "Oh, I read your book on such and such." And to begin with, I thought, "You're taking away all my security." And then happily, the reason they write to me usually is because they want to see things.

Well, I was going to say the flip side of deconstruction is reconstruction. Of course. Of course.

And for some people, they take it all apart and they just don't seem to be able to find a way to put it back together. Happily, I meet many people who do and find something stronger, sturdier, actually, that they can be more confident in. And that is actually or can be part of a normal human maturing process.

It's one of the many, many theories of psychological development, and I'm not wedded to this as a total theory, is that many people start off with a rather rigid system, whatever it is, somebody who becomes a Marxist when they're a student. I now know who I am because I'm part of the revolution. And then at a certain point, it doesn't quite seem to make sense, doesn't quite seem to fit, or they read the history of Stalinism.

Wait a minute. And then they enter a time of chaos when they really don't know what's going on. And then there is the possibility of a new sort of political maturity.

And so if that happens in the secular world, as we call it, then it can certainly happen within Christian faith as well. One more question before we wrap up today's podcast. This is an anonymous one coming from Virginia quite long.

So we'll just spell out the story here. It's a pastoral question as much as anything. My grandfather is 90 years old and has dementia.

From what I know about him, he was not a follower of Jesus. I come from a very conservative background where your faith is approved by your works. Although I've discovered my faith of my own since moving out of that environment, I still have a lingering voice in the back of my head about my grandfather's salvation.

Is salvation really as simple as believing that Jesus is Lord? Or do we, the church, sometimes add too much on to it? You see, the reason that I note he has dementia is

because I feel like hope has now lost for him. I've been married for over a year now and he doesn't remember being there, still asking me when I'm getting married. Where is the hope that he will believe in the Lord now? I guess I'm asking a lot of questions within a question, but this has really disrupted my faith this year.

I found myself asking God to save my grandfather while simultaneously questioning the goodness of God because of my grandfather's lack of salvation. You see, I've been praying for his salvation since I was a child and came to know the Lord. My prayers are completely hopeless now.

Where is the hope in my grandfather's life and his coming death? Wow, yeah. Great question and a sensitively put question. And I think we're all now aware because of the prevalence of dementia in modern Western society.

It didn't used to happen. People would die of stuff in their 50s and 60s. And the problem we now have of the diseases of old age is quite a new one.

Really, people haven't thought about until the last generation. I think the thing to grasp onto here is the love of God as creator. And also, and I may say more about this in another podcast.

I'm not sure about the grief of God over all that defaces and distorts his creation. In Genesis 6 when God looks at the Noah generation, it says, it grieved him to his heart. And this is not what people were made for.

And I think when somebody expresses a sensitive Christian view like this, I think that is an expression of the grief of God himself over the fact that this person who no longer has a memory, et cetera, et cetera, this is not what they were made for. However, one of the strange things I do know about dementia, I haven't had very much first-hand experience of being with people in that condition. I know a little bit about it, is that certain things still get through.

Often music still gets through. I had a friend whose wife had a chronic early onset Alzheimer's. And even though she had no idea who he was anymore, if there was a hymn that she knew on the radio, she would sing the whole thing along with, or hammer tune from her symphony or whatever.

Music can still get through and love can still get through. And even though they can't necessarily respond to love, the squeeze of a hand, the look of love in somebody's eye, I want to say we have no idea, quite literally no idea, what is going on when somebody in that helpless and puzzled and frightened state feels a reassuring squeeze of a hand or a familiar tune on the radio, or a voice that they dimly, dimly recognize saying, "I love you, it's good to be with you." And I really believe, just as I believe that God can speak to a tiny baby through the look in the mother's eye as she is feeding him, or I would say the

look in the father's eye, but I think we are made to respond immediately to the mother. I want to say that's the way that God expresses his love for that child.

And I would say at the end of life, that's one way that God can express his love. And who knows what response deep down in the broken recesses of personality may then be evoked. And then, as with all prayer, ultimately we leave the matter with God, rather than trying to cling on to it as they were in charge.

And even after death, for those who never on the face of it made a commitment in their life, would you say it's still valid for us to pray for the souls of those who have gone out? I think anyone who we have loved and is no longer with us, we can just hold them in the love of God. And I wouldn't be too specific about saying, "God, I want you to do this and this and this and this for this person." Partly because it is deeply mysterious, and I don't want to second guess all that. But yes, there are many people who, when they come up on my prayer list week by week, I simply hold on to them as though I'm picking them up and holding them in the love of God.

And there they are, and God knows that I still love them, and that that's quite appropriate. And see, the Protestant Church's rejection of praying for the dead was a rejection of the auction of purgatory. And just because we reject purgatory doesn't mean that we shouldn't, prayer is an expression of love.

And if I still love this person, it's perfectly okay to pray for them. It's been really helpful. Thank you.

A tough one, one that obviously touches directly on a lot of people. A lot of anxiety often sense in some of the questions that come through on this particular issue. And if, I think perhaps most helpful is simply to say, leave it in God's hands.

God will always do justly, and the most loving, just and merciful thing will be what God does. Thank you so much for taking the questions, Tom. This week, look forward to another one in a couple of weeks' time.

For the moment, if you want to get in touch with the show, well, we'll be making sure to give you the ways to do that very shortly. And do tune in again next time.

[music] I've been Justin Briley, theology and apologetics editor for Premiere, and the podcast has been brought to you in partnership with SBCK and NT Right Online.

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