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#223 Pastoral questions on porn, personal tragedy and coming back to faith (replay)

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom answers listener's pastoral questions including a person racked by guilt over whether his wife's miscarriages were a judgment on his porn addiction, a family wrestling with the death of a family member, and someone on a journey back to faith but unsure where to begin. • 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 have an urgent update to share with you. As you probably know, this podcast is made possible by the generous support of listeners like you. And with our financial year ending on June 30th, we're facing a \$52,000 gap in funding that must be closed by that date.

With just days to go, generous friends of the ministry have now offered to match every dollar given towards this goal up to \$10,000. So please take a moment today to give your best gift at premierinsight.org slash NT Wright. That's premierinsight.org forward slash NT Wright.

Thank you for understanding how important your gift is today and forgiving generously. And now it's time for today's podcast. Welcome to this replay of Ask NT Wright Anything, where we go back into the archives to bring you the best of the thought and theology of Tom Wright.

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That's premierunbelievable.com. And now for today's replay of Ask NT Wright Anything. The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast. Hello and welcome along to the podcast.

This is Justin Briley, sitting down with Tom Wright for your fortnightly theology fest. The show brought to you by premier in partnership with SBCK and NT Wright online. And today's show kind of wrapping up a little series really of more pastorally focused episodes of the podcast.

And today's questions include questions on sexual sin, tragedy and coming back to face. So do be aware if you're listening with others, especially young ones, that some of today's questions include adult themes and sensitive issues. Well today on the show we're going to be tackling some of your pastoral questions.

And we do this every so often. We sort of did it a little bit last time actually Tom looking at some specific marriage issues. But today it's a whole range of different questions that have come in.

And right at the top we're going to make our usual caveat. We discuss these kinds of questions that you're not here to be anyone's pastor online. We always recommend people have someone they can speak to go to.

And this is essentially part of the duty of a parish priest, isn't it, in the Anglican tradition? They are certainly there, at least if not to personally be that they can give you put you on to someone. They can put you on somebody who can, yes, yes. And seems to be part of the pastor's job is to know when to say this is above my pay grade.

Absolutely. And certainly in terms of sitting here with a microphone, this is not how to do pastoral work. So we can nudge in the right direction.

But the local person who can pray with you and follow you in your journey is what you need. But nevertheless people do often write in with pastoral issues of one sort or another. We've got some quite tough ones coming up.

But I'll start with something that may be a little bit more general. This was an interesting question from Victor in Switzerland. Which I can see why this question comes from Switzerland, actually, as I read it.

It says, in the prosperous western world, much of our time and energy involves innocent, worldly pleasures, a good meal with friends, hiking in the mountains, that was my Switzerland reference. A seaside holiday, cultivating the garden, watching an entertaining film. But how does this square up with do not love the world or anything in the world? First John 2.15. And Jesus' admonitions to hate our lives even.

So I think Victor's feeling a bit guilty for enjoying the mountain hiking, the seaside holiday, a good film. Says, didn't Jesus say we should hate our lives and we're not supposed to be enjoying life necessarily? Has Victor got this the wrong way around, I don't know? No, I think those very strict commands about hating your own life, etc. Are necessary always to be there because at any moment God may say, okay, it's time for you to go and be a missionary in the wrong part of Africa or whatever.

And I want you to give all that up and go and do that. And Victor and I and anyone else needs to be prepared to say, okay, this has been really important to me, but I guess it's now going. And hating in the vivid way that early Jews use that language and loving indeed doesn't necessarily mean absolutely loathing it.

It just means being prepared to say no. And loving there doesn't mean enjoying. It means giving yourself totally to it in such a way that it will be impossible to pull back.

And there are many things, of course, because this world is God's world and it's a good world and we humans are meant to be in it, then everything from music to flowers to mountains to the sea, etc. Is ours is given to us to enjoy? Paul says in 1 Corinthians that all things are given to us to enjoy and nothing is to be rejected if it's received a Thanksgiving. He's talking about food, but I think the principle applies much more widely, so that yes, if that's what you find enjoyable, you know, my wife and I love walking by the sea, which is why it's so hard for us to move to Oxford.

It's about far from you from the sea as you can get. But we don't say, oh dear, well, we're enjoying this too much. But if somebody had said to us, you've got to move to Oxford, we said, no, no, no, we must be by the sea and we're not moving it.

And then one might think, actually, there's a renunciation which has got to happen there. And perhaps it's good to keep in balance the fact that it's evident from the Gospels that Jesus enjoyed himself. He rescued a party from when he turned water into wine.

There's a sense in which he's not saying, we must renounce all of these. And he relishes the created order. Consider the birds of the earth.

They don't sow and reap and gather into the barn. God looks after them. They're just having a good time.

And so, and Jesus is enjoying the natural world as the natural world is enjoying God, as it were. And so there is that sense of relishing the goodness of God's creation, which is really good. It's ultimately about not making an idol of those things.

Our ultimate idol becomes improving our goldfandy cap. And, you know, my bringing people to Jesus becomes some kind of very secondary thing, obviously. I think things have got out of balance.

Unless you happen to be a gold professional. That's the only way you can feed your back. Sure.

But no, you're right. Anything can become an idol. And sometimes, some spiritual directors will say to some people, you need to ask God directly, is there something in your life which he wants you to hand over? And often people who go into monastic communities, that's one of the deals.

What are we handing over here? And if the answer is, well, no, I'm keeping it all. Well, sorry. If you want to live a more intense life with God, there may well be things that have to be given up.

And that's the question. Daniel is in Stanford, California, and says, what would you recommend to someone interested in coming back to the Christian faith after many years of exile? I do not know if I believe yet, but I know I don't disbelieve anymore. It's an interesting way of putting it.

Mentally and emotionally, it's a very confusing and conflicting time. What should I do? What should I read? Wow. Wow.

That's a great question. I mean, because I don't know Daniel personally, I don't know whether he's somebody who normally works out of his intellect with the feelings coming along behind, or there is somebody who goes into things feelings first with and letting the brain catch up later. And I would recommend quite a different bibliography according to which it was.

Many people in many parts of America recently have found Alice Willard's books very helpful, because I think he and I are quite close in some ways. I haven't found his style as easy for me to get hold of, but also I think we are quite different personalities. If somebody is wanting to come back in, then there are all sorts of different ways.

You see some, I remember after the fall of communism, there were many young people in Russia who had no faith because it had been drilled out of them in school. We don't believe in that stuff anymore, but who instinctively knew they wanted to reconnect and didn't know how. And one of the pieces of advice that would sometimes be given to some people would be kneel down in front of a picture of the cross or something or an icon and simply kneel and stay there.

And perhaps cross yourself and the East would do it like that. Now to us modern Western Protestants, this is, this is ritualism, this is terrible, but actually what your body does communicates things to you inside. And sometimes for some people that can be aware of your body then saying to your emotions and your imagination in your mind, there is something here about humility before the crucified Jesus, which actually is going to be the center of my life.

I wouldn't recommend that to everybody, but I wouldn't disrecommend it either. But obviously for me, I would say this, but I would actually say to anybody and everybody, find a new and different translation of the Bible that you've not used before and just set yourself to read it with delight and read whole books as if they were novels rather than reading it ten verses at a time. You wouldn't listen to a symphony like that.

I mean we have very little detail obviously in this question from Daniel understandably, but it's interesting that he's saying he's coming back to the Christian faith after many years of exile. So I appreciate what you're saying there, sometimes what's unique about that story is you can't go back to the faith that maybe grew up with or something like that. Absolutely, people in that situation, I've known many in that situation, the one place they don't want to go back to is the Sunday school where they were told they were naughty or whatever it was.

And that's why I say a quite different version of the Bible. And just relish it, read it differently, read it as I say in large chunks and just see where it takes you and find a church, a fellowship where people can meet you where you are and where you can make good and wise friendships. And if I could recommend a book simply Christian, the one Tom Wright is a good place to begin as well with some of the basics and an overview of what the Christian life is about.

Let's go to an anonymous one here and it's anonymous for a very good reason. This is a really tough one but this person says my wife recently had a miscarriage and I wonder if it could have been my fault for habitually sinning with pornography and masturbation. I know how God dealt with David adultery by taking his son's life.

So I wonder if God could still discipline us like that. It's a good question and I know a lot of people, I know a lot of people who have in our age with the easy accessibility of pornography, et cetera, have gone that route. It seems to me it's a modern form of idolatry.

Paul talks in the context of sexual misbehavior of covetousness, which is idolatry. But in a sense, we are all idolators at some point. Whenever we say we're sorry, it's because we have secretly worshiped this or that or the other idol and it's led us down this or the other dark path.

And I think anyone who's afflicted with that, it's a form of addiction and one can get help with all forms of addiction and there is help available. So that said, I think the idea of God doing something like that as a specific punishment for what this man has done is a very dangerous and potentially damaging view of God. Now, I'm not saying that God under some circumstances can't use some sorrow as a way of alerting us to the fact that there's something wrong.

If that suddenly makes you feel guilty, well, maybe you need to feel sorry and a bit guilty

and you need to deal with that with some pastoral help. But I wouldn't rush to connect the two. I would say if that reminds you that something is a miss with the universe and that makes you think of your own wrongness, then deal with the wrongness, but don't join them up.

So certainly the advice here is don't, no, the miscarriage was not a result of sin. Exactly. Let's face it, that would indict 99% probably of young Christian men these days who have struggled at some point with this issue.

But of course he does see that this appears to be what happens in the Old Testament and David's adultery. Now, what's to say to that? There's many, many other stories in the Old Testament which go different ways. God deals with David because he's the anointed king for goodness sake and David needs his nose rubbing in this at this precise point.

And then strangely the next child to be born is Solomon and he's David's successor. So what's all that about? So as with Jesus in John 9 when they find this man born blind, the disciples say, who was it who sinned him or his parents that he was born blind? Jesus says, no, it's not how it works. And there is a sense of please don't rush to make the connection between one particular sin or set of sins and one particular physical result.

And there are many, many things in this world which are not as we would wish as with miscarriages, as with people being born blind, etc. And because we have a strong sense of the justice of God which is a good strong sense, we all tend to short circuit the process and say, ah, if God was just he wouldn't have done this unless dot dot dot therefore maybe it's this. And I want to say back off, back right off and be humble before God, talk to a pastor about this, but do not regard this as a one for one because really it's not like that.

Yeah, so we are present with you there. You obviously have not left the name, but certainly don't connect this with the madness carriage, but nevertheless obviously do everything within your path to deal with the issues that you are aware of the setting. But thank you.

I just wanted to quickly remind you that this podcast is made possible by the generosity of friends like you. And right now we're facing a \$52,000 funding gap that must be closed before the end of our financial year on June 30th. Generous friends of this ministry have offered to match every dollar given up to \$10,000.

So I'm asking you to give your very best gift right now. Your gift will help keep important conversations like this one coming to listeners like you. Closing the gap in full by June 30th is vital, so please give your best gift today knowing your gift will be doubled.

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forward slash NT right. Thank you.

This is a rather a long one and that's the nature of some of these pastoral questions. So I'm going to give a moment to read this out. John in West Yorkshire says this week, my 18 year old nephew Joe died unexpectedly at home in front of his father, sister and grandmother.

Aaron Rodamblance is attended as did the police. However, before the paramedics arrived, my brother, his father, his father, he declared dead in hospital. This story is in itself heartbreaking.

A family that witnessed the shocking death of a loved one at such a young age and so unexpectedly. Sadly, the story requires some additional context. Joe's mother died from cancer when he was just two years old.

My brother never remarried. He stopped working and dedicated his life to raising his two children in the most saintly committed patient and loving way. I'm writing this message since I've been slowly reconnecting to my faith after around 20 years of being agnostic.

I was born a Catholic and eventually stopped practicing upon the death of my father and Joe's mother who died within a few years of each other. While I cannot say I was fully reconciled to Christ, I enjoyed the exploration of faith that I was pursuing, largely stimulated by the unbelievable podcast. And while I could rationalize my father's death and even my sister-in-law's death, though she was very young, this last tragedy has introduced us to an entirely new sphere of suffering.

Half of my brother's family is dead. My mother, who's almost 80, has lost her husband's sister-in-law, now her grandson, who she helped to co-raise with her brother. My mother comes from Italy, born into poverty, suffering during the war.

Now she has to deal with this. She's a devout Catholic and performs a rosary almost nightly. Her prayers are simple.

She asks God to protect her children and above all her grandchildren. So where was God when my nephew died? Why would a loving God permit this type of horror to affect our family? Why has this prayer been so evidently unanswered? None of it makes any sense to us all. I look forward to hearing your response.

I mean, we're getting even there. I'm sure a potted history of what's obviously has been an awful situation for all involved. And John is simply saying, I want to reconnect with my faith, but when life throws all this at you, it's hard to see how there's a loving God in the middle of it.

Yes, my wife and I were sitting with some old friends the other day, who we've reconnected with, having come south, who described a particular situation that they

were close to, and just said, they're devout Christians. They said, we are having a real struggle seeing where God is in all this. And I said to them what I say to myself under certain circumstances.

And it's that word from Elie Wiesel's book, *Night*, which describes famously the horrible situation in a Nazi death camp with a young boy being publicly hanged in front of all these other people and the boy being so frail and thin from malnutrition that he didn't die at once because he didn't have enough weight to be hanged properly as it were. And somebody shouting, where is God? Where is God? And somebody saying, he is there hanging on that rope. And there is a sense at the heart of the Christian gospel that that is the question and that is the answer.

That when we say, where is God? Where is God? The Christian answer is love is hanging on a tree. Jesus crucified, draws into one the horror and pain of the world. And his mother, who was probably only 15 years older than him, so she'd been maybe mid-40s or so, who brought him up and loved him and cherished him, is standing there at the foot of the cross, having sung her wild song about the time has come and my soul magnifies the Lord.

She is in exactly that position. And I think all the disciples on Holy Saturday between Good Friday and Easter were just saying, that's it. We thought we knew where we were and it's now all gone horribly wrong.

And that was the experience of the Jewish people for hundreds of years. And of course, the natural reaction to that would be, well, it's all right because Jesus rose again the next day. Yeah, they didn't know that at the time.

What I have come to realize, I think I said this in an earlier podcast, is that the biblical tradition of lament, which is so strong in the Psalms, and in some of them in an unrelieved way, Psalm 88 particularly, the biblical tradition of lament is given to God's people in order to hold on to the pain of the world and their own pain in the presence of God without it necessarily, being resolved. Some of the lament Psalms do turn around towards the end, 22 being a good example. But in the light of the New Testament and the work of the Holy Spirit and what Paul says about the spirit and suffering in Romans 8 particularly, but not only there, then I think I want to say that one of the reasons God called Israel and one of the reasons why Jesus was Jesus and one of the reasons why we are the church is so that the sorrow of God may be expressed by the spirit in the people of God.

That's a really tough thing to say. I attended just over a year ago the funeral of a God-son who was in his mid-30s and was a wonderful Christian man, husband and father, little children, struck down by cancer and he died as he'd lived bravely and with faith and with humor. And we went to this, it was one point of your wonderful funeral, but you're left with this, okay, this should not have happened.

And so I'm not saying this as a sort of a heartless outsider, we in a sense have all been there. But so I really do want to say, and I've learned this from one of my recent students who's had a lot to lament in her life, but she was studying the Hebrew Psalms and looking at the ways in which part of the vocation of the people of God is to hold onto the pain of God at the heart of his creation, which is a kind of a cruciform pattern. And we easily escape back again to the 18th century where people say either God is omnipotent and doesn't care or he's not really competent and so even though he does love, he can't do anything about it.

That's a full antithesis. We have in the Anglican tradition at Pentecost a little verseical response which goes, Alleluia, the Spirit of God fills the whole world, Alleluia, which can sound incredibly trite. Oh yes, Spirit of God, isn't that nice? And I once preached a sermon beginning with that and I said, if the Spirit of God fills the whole world, then what the Spirit of God is mostly doing right now is grieving because think of Syria and think of North Africa and think of many, many places in the world.

So I want to say it looks as though this is a really, really tough vocation to hold onto the pain of the world in the presence of God. And if that reminds you of Jesus stretching out his two arms on the cross and holding together the pain of the world and the pain of God, then so be it. But I shudder because I don't like doing that.

I don't want to do that. Just as we conclude this section, any practical advice for what John might do in these circumstances, as someone who's evidently feels he's got this fragile faith that he's trying to, sort of in some sense, come back to you. But again, it must be to share this puzzle and sorrow and horror with a wise local pastor who can share it and hear it and pray with them, et cetera.

That's got to be the answer. You cannot be a Christian by yourself. You can try for a while.

But it's like trying to drive a car with only one tyre. Sorry, you need the whole kid. And the whole kid is the larger community of faith.

That's not always easy. Some people don't know of a good local church that they trust or whatever. But that has to be what to do.

John, I hope that helps in some way. It's gratifying to know that there are such a variety of listeners to this podcast. People who are both well on in the Christian journey, people who are maybe just trying and looking at it to start with.

One final question as we wrap up today's programme. Tim is in Tennessee. Says, I have a question about God's spirit in dwelling us as it relates to another question.

Why aren't Christians more like Christ? Certainly, it's much more than a matter of just trying harder. It seems clear we're to be transformed, changed in the core of our being

to become a new creation in which love is our most natural reaction. Yet, I think it's safe to say that the world does not view Christians on the whole as more loving than anyone else.

Can you give some practical how-to suggestions regarding our role in being transformed by the spirit? Wow, yes. I mean, obviously the old rules are the best, the Bible, prayer, sacraments and ministry to the poor. Those four are ways in which in the New Testament we are continually reminded that we should be both serving God and becoming like Christ in doing so.

And because we are all different, our personalities are different. Gerald Manley Hopkins said Christ plays in 10,000 places. There are many different facets of what Christ likeness looks like, and I have known some strikingly Christ-like people in my life.

I've been blessed to know them, and they're quite different. But as you've got to know them, something about them has just said, I think I'm looking at a bit of Jesus here. But knowing the people that I'm talking about, these are all people of prayer, and people of quite serious prayer and one from a very evangelical tradition, one from a sort of orthodox tradition, one from an Anglican tradition, and different patterns of prayer.

But anyone who opens themselves takes the time and trouble and to go to a spiritual director and to learn how to pray and to be drawn out in prayer, and to learn how to pray scripture in such a way that that becomes not just something in the head, but something which starts to live inside. And yes, sadly, many Christians give Jesus a bad name to put it bluntly. And if you look at the New Testament, it seems to be pretty much the same there.

I'm not sure that everyone looking at all the people in Corinth who call themselves Christians would have said, oh, that's what Jesus is like. But with some, they seem to have done. And so it isn't just a matter of trying harder, but again, it's a matter of renouncing the modern Western individualism and recognizing we need one another, and corporate prayer, but also having either a pastoral or spiritual director who can challenge you and say, now, in your prayers, are you doing this? How do you thought about this and coming from your personality? Do you realize that this might be a weakness or a problem? I mean, just to push back ever so slightly as well on Tim's assessment, it's safe to say that the world does not view Christians on the whole is more loving than anyone else.

I'd say that's true in the sense that most often, unfortunately, in our media, particular characters get emphasized. And if that's the view that most people have of a Christian, you can understand it. When you actually ask people about Christians, they know, it's often the opposite.

It's often actually, oh, but of course my friend so-and-so is a lovely person. It's a really

nice question. So I sometimes think there's rather a difference between the media perception and the actual data.

That's certainly true in many communities up and down. This country, places where I've ministered, where the church is on the street, often below the radar, doesn't get into the news, but most of the food banks in this country are run by Christians as volunteers. Most of the people who go and do prison visiting, et cetera.

Not all of them. There are many, many people of Goodwill, but in many communities, it's the Christians who will just notice, oh, so-and-so seems to be sick at the moment. Let's just see what they need and we can help them.

Of course other people do that as well. We don't have a monopoly on it, but there are many places where, yes, the church is the church. In my work in previous jobs, I've been privileged to see the church being the church in very local, very often run down communities, and it's a wonderful sight.

As people do notice. Thanks again for the time, Tom. It's been great to spend half an hour or so with you.

That's great. I do hope that if your question hasn't been answered, that you'll have benefited, at least from some of those that have, and indeed, when it comes to these pastoral issues, that you'll seek out a wise pastor as well to help get through them. For the moment, thanks very much for being with me.

Thank you. And we'll see you next time. Yes, indeed.

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