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#56 Fasting, resting and worship

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Is fasting a practice that Christians should take up? How does Tom balance work and rest? Has Sunday worship become just a musical event? Tom answers listener questions on Christian practices.

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Transcript

[Music] The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

[Music] Hello there and welcome back, I'm Justin Briley, Premier's Theology and Apologetics editor, bringing you another edition of the show, which is of course, brought to you in partnership with Premier SBCK and NT Right Online. And Tom of course, a renowned Bible scholar, senior research fellow at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, and sits down with me regularly to answer your questions.

And we're going to be looking at your questions on fasting, Sabbath rest, and worship as well on today's show. It's been quite the week as well, hasn't it? With the Meghan and Harry interview, claims of racism. There's actually a video with Tom on the issue of racial justice that has been doing the rounds on our Facebook page, very well received once.

So do go and check that out if you can, and if you want to make sure you don't miss any

of those sorts of additional items, do get yourself signed up to our newsletter as well. You can also ask a question by registering with us as well and get other resources too. That's all available from AskNTRight.com. You're welcome to support the show as well, and by the way, if you're listening from the states, we'd love you to do that from our new website, premierinsight.org, and click on AskNTRight, anything.

It's going to be a reminder just in a moment of Tom's involvement at this year's unbelievable conference, but firstly, hello to Harry in Tasmania, who wrote in to say hi Justin and Tom. This isn't a question, but I'm a pastor of a small Pentecostal church on the northwest coast of Tasmania. Just wanted to let you know, every year between Christmas and Easter, we pick a gospel and walk or run through it chapter by chapter.

This year we've chosen John, and I've been using John for everyone, Tom's book, for my preparation. When I heard about broken signposts on the podcast, I went straight into my office and bought a copy online. Really appreciate the work both of you do.

I know Pentecostals aren't really known for using their brains a lot, but I feel like there's a new generation who aren't just satisfied to just feel saved and want to need to understand how the gospels work and what it means to live their faith. You too help so much by having Frank and easy to understand conversations that don't dodge the difficult topics from a pastor who has felt isolated at times and under-equipped for ministry. I'm truly grateful for the work you do.

Thank you Harry for getting touched. So glad you've enjoyed the show. Glad you were able to get hold of broken signposts as well, Tom's most recent book.

Well, if you want to get in touch again, askentiright.com is the place to register. Now, some great news that we were able to talk about last week, Tom is going to be part of our global unbelievable conference on Saturday the 15th of May. You can attend from anywhere in the world.

Simply register at unbelievable.live. As well as our premium ticket, there's even a pay what you want option as well. How to tell the greatest story ever told is our theme. Looking at the story of Jesus, how it shaped the modern world and how we tell it afresh to a new generation.

It'll be hosted by myself and Ruth Jackson. Tom will be one of our special speakers along with another Tom, Tom Holland. We're going to have them in conversation as well as part of the conference.

There'll be a special live edition of Askentiright Anything. Plus speakers including Claire Williams, Sean and Josh McDowell. It's not just another Zoom conference.

There's an interactive 3D resource hub. So much going on on this day, Saturday the 15th of May. And you can attend, especially if you're in the US or somewhere else in the world

with the deliberately time shifted this conference to later in the day here in the UK through to the evening so that you can attend from the USA at a time that doesn't mean you gap to get up in the middle of the night.

So book your place now. www.unbelievable.live. Okay. Time to get into today's conversation with Tom.

Welcome back to the show. And today with Tom, we're talking about Christian practices like fasting how we recharge, Sabbath and worship as well. Now, worship is certainly something Christians talk a lot about.

Not so much fasting these days, Tom. And I've got a couple of interesting questions here. One from Jonathan in Antalya in Turkey and Anna in Sweden.

Let's see what Jonathan has to say first. He says, as I understand it, fasting is not the norm for most in the Western church today. In my tradition, it is a very common discipline.

Most people in my tradition participate in at least a twice yearly break through fast and have several things they are believing for. Many call this an Esther fast referencing obviously the fast esticals for in Esther 4. I've read and listened to some biblical perspectives on fasting from Tim Mackie of the Bible project and Scott McKnight and both unequivocally say as I understand them that a breakthrough fast is not biblical fasting and it is at its basis an attempt to manipulate God into giving us what we want even if our desires are selfless and noble. Both Mackie and McKnight acknowledge that while there is fasting all over the Bible, it's not spelled out in clear terms what it is and why people do it.

And I was wondering if you could shed some light on what fasting meant to Jews in the first century and subsequently early Christians. And Anna in Sweden also wants to know about fasting in general and its connection to prayer as well. What people in Jesus' time would have thought about fasting since it's not taught about much in the New Testament more just assumed that Jews would practice it.

So yeah what's your views on fasting time? I'm really grateful for these questions partly because I'm not an expert on this either in theory or in practice and I think this is only audio not video but I would be inclined to say if you could see me you would see that I am not a good example of somebody who fasts three times a week particularly during lockdown I think a lot of us have found that whole eating and drinking question very difficult. But yes in biblical times in Jesus' day the great fasts that the Jews regularly kept were linked in Jewish tradition with the great times of desolation that had happened particularly with the destruction of the temple and with other similar disasters and there's a remarkable passage in Zechariah which talks about the fasts being turned into feasts and the fasts that they refer to are fasts which we know were connected by the

Jews of that day with specific terrible things in the folk memory the historical memory of the people of God. And so when Jesus says that the children of the bridegroom can't fast when the bridegroom is there with them the time will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them and then they will fast away.

Ordent difficult passage in Jesus' teaching. It looks as though he's saying I am doing something now which will put all your commemorations of the temple into the shade and yes there will be a very strange moment when I am taken away but in principle we are launching out on a new day which is not looking back to past disasters but looking on to the new kingdom which God is inaugurating. So that the fasting is then the fasting question is then turned round and looks very different.

We find in the second and third generation in the apostolic fathers so-called the discussion of which two days to fast on and it's almost taken for granted that you will fast for two days in the week the question is which two should they be. And this isn't done as a ritual to twist God's arm it's done almost rather I sometimes think like the so-called five and two diet that's been quite popular in this country at least recently where people eat minimally for two days in the week and then ordinarily the rest of the week and apparently that's a very good way of losing weight. I've only tried it once myself and it did work and then there were changes in family circumstances sadly I couldn't keep it up but there are good things like that and I think in the ancient world people knew perfectly well that you needed to have a rhythm in your eating and drinking and that it was actually for generally healthy reasons a good thing but then as well the fascinating connection with prayer and yes it's always possible for people to imagine that they are manipulating God I'm doing all this for you and now I'm gonna twist your arm God to do this.

Now no serious Christian actually prays like that so I but I'm to this extent agreeing with my good friends Tim Mackey and Scott McKnight and saying there is no one thing called a breakthrough fast which you have to do and that kind of guarantees whatever you're wanting however there are many many times and it's been so throughout church history when God's people think actually we need to be really really serious and committed about our prayer at this moment and of course for many Western Christians this happens in Lent in Holy Week, Good Friday when we want to be able to give our whole attention to what's going on as we commemorate Jesus dying on the cross and it's as though they're saying prayer is not something that you just do with your mind or your imagination or your spirit prayer is a whole body activity it's why in the Bible people kneel down to pray very often because what you do with your body actually communicates who you really are at that moment and it's almost automatic in the book of Acts when they appoint elders in a place they often will pray and fast and then lay hands on the people who God is directing them to lay hands on so I think probably we in the Western church have a lot to learn about this I certainly do but those have been my starting points and and maybe once this lockdown is over and we can scratch our heads

and think now how should we reorder our lives these are things we ought to get back into very helpful thank you Tom let's turn to another area of Christian living and this is from Doug in Kentucky USA who says my question is about taking time to recharge me time as some would say my father was a pastor of a small rural church and even with a small congregation I know how taxing and stressful it can be to try and meet people's needs we read in the Bible where Jesus would get away from the crowds from time to time to be alone and pray and even God rested on the seventh day but we also see where we must deny ourselves and follow Christ take up our crosses so where's the line of giving up ourselves and our needs and also making sure we've got enough left to give what about taking time for our family so as not to neglect their needs we'd be great to hear Tom explain how he draws the line personally between working in his business in ministry and recharging as well as Justin and his wife in that ministry how do you say no or do you and then what about those of us who may not be pastors but maybe doing the Lord's work through volunteering women's shelters caring for disabled loved ones etc it is very difficult sometimes it feels selfish to say no and to take time for ourselves what's your advice and where to draw the line and maybe a related question here from Gretchen in California a shorter question which simply says what are your thoughts on keeping the Sabbath which is obviously about that rest that we all need so yeah what what about your personally Tom I mean I mean yes lockdown has muddy the water a lot here hasn't it because I've changed massively it has muddy the water but also Maggie and I have gone through a major time of transition this last two years because I've taken retirement from my job in St Andrews but I'm in a semi-retirement job in Wickliffe all in Oxford so we're kind of renegotiating and rehabgating how that actually works what time belongs to whom and how to play that and then of course the pandemic and lockdown has radically affected that as well in some ways Maggie and I spend many more of our waking hours actually either in the same room or in the next room to each other because I'm working from home all the time and that's been delightful I've thoroughly enjoyed that but but there are puzzles as well as to how you draw boundaries but obviously like most clergy I guess this has been an ongoing question throughout my adult life and actually I think it's an ongoing question for most people in most jobs particularly when the pressures been on in the 80s and 90s and people have had to work longer hours and many law firms or banks or whatever expect employees to work not just a 40-hour week but a 50 or 60 or 70-hour week and then you won't get promotion unless you do and then the family suffers or there's a divorce or whatever all the children are not properly looked after these are huge pressures and again it's we've lived through a period I mentioned in a previous podcast about farming and the damage done to the land and to the whole ecosystems of the country by the relentless pressure to earn more to make more to get more out of the resources in a way that's been very damaging and the same thing has happened in the last generation on many many fronts so I think we have lived with that and struggled with it and I would be the last person to say that I've got it right and if my wife was listening which I hope she's not she would be standing there with her hands on a hip saying no absolutely used to be a lot to learn so I'm not saying got it right

I do remember one time when I was in college chaplaincy here in Oxford 35 years ago or so we realized at one point that from the beginning of University term to the end of University term I was just not there at home I was in college the whole time ministering to people taking services preparing sermons teaching etc and we decided we we looked each other in the eye we decided okay every Tuesday night starting at 6 30 which is it was the end of the evening service this is a time when Maggie and I are going to be together the very first week after we firmly said that I came out of the evening service and somebody rushed up to me and said oh Tom you've got to come at once because so and so remember the congregation just tried to kill themselves and they need you now and I took a deep breath and I said you go and look after him and I'll see him in the morning because I knew that if I call Maggie and said I'm sorry we've got an urgent passport thing you can just hear the hiss of escaping steam out of a marriage basically and the chap was all right and thank God but I thought that that's that's the kind of angst that you get and I wish I'd done that more often I wish I'd been able to factor that in more regularly and we're now looking at what does semi-retirement actually mean which and as I'm saying no to almost all new invitations that I get and I'm experiencing quite a lot of sense of liberation about that as well as a sense of maybe there are one or two that I probably ought to do but this is really difficult and so this is the very practical that this person Duggan Kentucky asked me for the personal thing and that's how it's been the other thing to say is this I'm an extrovert I get energy from being with people so I recharge by being in a group by being with ten or a dozen students by being with members of a congregation having an exciting time sitting in a room by myself doesn't recharge me it will eventually if I'm listening to music or reading a good book and so other people who are more introverts and a lot of pastors are introverts then they do need to recharge by withdrawing from that and that's fine so it's partly knowing oneself and knowing one's reactions and knowing the same things about one's family and what they really need but reading a book a long time ago by a wise pastor who had four children and every weekend I think he said to them now this next Saturday afternoon wherever it is each one of you gets an hour of my time to do whatever you want to do during that hour and if it's playing chess if it's going for a bike ride if it's talking about something bad that's happened at school you will have all of me for that hour now an hour may not seem very much but actually if it's a total gift to that child then yeah that can mean a lot so we have to be wise and creative about doing this kind of thing I mean you asked for my personal thoughts on this Doug as well and funnily enough my wife Lucy just preached on this very recently the the rhythm that you do see in scripture of Jesus obviously very busy lots of calls on his time and attention but going away to acquire a place to pray taking that me time recharging frequently as well and taking naps you know I love the fact that Jesus takes a nap in a boat while there's a storm blowing up around you know it's a biblical injunction that we should all take naps during the day I think but the the point being that that we've my wife likened it in her sermon to those instructions to when the there's the safe instructions on an airplane flight and it says if the mask drops down you should attach your own mask before helping

someone else and I think it's the same if we're not being fed ourselves we will run dry and we will ultimately burn out and that's no help to anyone ultimately if we're so busy helping other people that we we actually end up you know sort of running out of oxygen ourselves yeah quite yeah I remember once being on Southwestern Airlines and the air hostess said if you're sitting next to a child or your husband then make sure you do your mask first before helping them and nice all the men but yeah there is there is real wisdom in that I like that illustration and one final question Tom this is on worship generally from Ron in Tennessee he says I recently read the challenge of Jesus now working my way through the day the revolution began I feel like the scales are falling off my eyes that you become a breath of spring fresh air to me transforming my view of God myself and my vocation in God's world can't thank you enough anyway my question is on worship in the day the revolution began you said that sin is a failure of worship humans are made to worship the God who created them in his own image and so to be sustained and renewed in that image bearing capacity worship was and is a matter of gazing with delight gratitude and love at the Creator God and expressing his praise in wise articulate speech those who do this are formed by this activity to become the generous humble stewards through whom God's creative and sustaining love is let loose into the world that was all a quote from your book Tom but then Ron goes on to say but in much of contemporary American evangelical Christianity it seems as though the concept of worship has been truncated to mean almost exclusively a musical event and yet your definition of worship seems to imply much much more could you comment on whether you think we've limited the idea of worship and how a fully biblical picture of worship might challenge some of these contemporary issues yeah thanks Ron and I'm delighted naturally that you're reading my books that's that's very good news and I'm fascinated by what you say about worship becoming more and more just a musical event because I think that's a reaction against earlier generations in the free churches particularly where worship was mostly a sermon with a few prayers and a couple of hymns either side as it were and and a few notices and this and that and I think it's a way of redressing a balance there and saying we want to spend time praising God and we've got these wonderful new songs which are new songwriters of Britain and and these enable us to go into a different space almost and I want to say great now now that we've discovered that that puts us back on the map with the rich older traditions of worship back behind the sort of modern ie the last 200 years of free church worship where a rich diet of music and liturgy was the norm and particularly in churches that majored on sacramental worship the the sacrament of the Lord supper or the Eucharist or Holy Communion whatever you call it is actually a drama it's like a great play and we are invited to become characters in this drama in which Jesus is playing the central role of course and to find ourselves drawn into his story all as an act of worship and that's something that I fear many who simply have 15 worship songs and then a quick sermon or whatever never realize that that worship is is a play it's a drama and some people say oh how terrible are we just play acting no no no this is the real life drama and here's the thing when we read scripture in public I feel really quite passionate about this when you

read the Bible in public you are rehearsing the mighty acts of God to God's glory where they are reading a chapter from first Kings and then a chapter from Acts or Revelation or but Genesis or whatever ideally you do so in sequence you have an Old Testament and a New Testament reading as a way of saying we are actually rehearsing the entire story from Genesis to Revelation because we are part of that story it's God's story it's the Jesus-focused story and we do this to God's glory and then yes we sing around it breaking it up with song in order to give ourselves time to reflect on what we've just heard and to pray it in and the whole thing is an act of worship reading a passage from the Bible is not simply informing the congregation of a bit of the story they might have forgotten before the preacher preaches on it it is in principle an act of worship to God the Creator God the God of the story in that context then we need to recover and many many Christians around the world are doing this very happily at the moment need to recover a sense of integration with older liturgical styles and contents which actually I think there is more of an appetite for doing now there was a kind of ultra Protestantism a while ago which said that any sort of formality anything that isn't purely free floating and informal must be legalistic and ritualistic and therefore wicked and I think we have to grow out of that yes of course legalism and ritualism is always a danger not least when you're doing all the recent worship songs and I have suffered the hands of worship leaders who sing the same stuff week after week and then you go to another church in the same tradition the other side of the world and you find they're singing the exact same song it may be good songs but friends let's actually be more mature about this and draw on the great riches from down in the tree because that's the other thing that when we are praising God at the moment we are the present representatives of a great multitude that no one can number that have been ever since Abraham, Isaac and Jacob but especially ever since Paul and Peter and Mary in the Apostles and we ought to relish drawing on the riches of that great tradition and sharpening up refining whatever but doing it in a rich way rather than a perfunctory way one last thing about sin is a failure of worship when Paul indicts the world for sin in Romans chapter one notice that what he says is that the wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness and injustice the ungodliness that is the failure of worship comes first and it results in injustice which is the distortion of God's good creation and then sin what we call sin flows out from that so remind ourselves that worshipping the true God is absolutely what we're called to do and be. Tom thank you so much thank you for these really interesting questions as well all those who've sent them in as ever you can send your question and as well you'll hear the ways to do that very shortly but for now thank you very much for being with me this week. Hey thank you for listening to today's show next time we'll be tackling your questions on the Catholic and Orthodox Church and don't forget to check out our show partners SBCK is Tom's UK publisher and for Tom's video courses go to NT right online and you can find out more about this show at ask NT right calm do head over by the way to unbelievable dot live to register for that upcoming conference Tom right our special guest for the day you can attend wherever you are in the world on Saturday the 15th of May again unbelievable dot live for now have a good week we'll see you next time you

(gentle music)