

OpenTheo

#21 Free will and the problem of evil

September 11, 2019



Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

An atheist listener asks a question about free will and the problem of evil. Will it be possible for there to be another 'fall' in the new creation? And the hosts of the Libertarian Christian Podcast have some questions for Tom about living as Christians in today's world.

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Transcript

[Music] Premier Podcast.

[Music] The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

[Music] Hello, welcome to the show, it's Justin sitting down with Tom Wright to ask him your question again on your regular theology think fest.

This week taking on a big issue, the problem of suffering. Lots of questions that have come in on that. We're also going to toss in a couple on living as a Christian in today's world.

But you can ask any question you want as well. By registering over at the website askntwright.com. As ever, the show's brought to you by Premier in partnership with SBCK and NT Wright Online. Just a quick bit of housekeeping before we get into today's edition.

If you like this show and you live on the west coast of the USA, you might want to check

out Unbelievable Live in LA. It's my other show Unbelievable coming to Costa Mesa or Costa Mesa as I've been told to pronounce it. In California, it's Friday the 11th and Saturday the 12th of October.

The Friday night is a live audience edition of the show with renowned Christian thinker Professor John Lennox. In conversation with agnostic talk show host Dave Rubin. And then on Saturday, John Lennox and a whole team of Christian apologists join me for Unbelievable the conference.

So do book your place for the 11th and 12th of October at unbelievable.live. We've had some lovely appreciation of the show come in recently. Nick Jones tweeted, "Thanks for access to the pastoral side of Dr. Wright. Really enjoying the Ask NTY anything podcast and find it quite helpful to my own pastoral ministry." Thank you very much, Nick.

And if you're listening and you enjoy the show, help others to discover it too by leaving a review and a rating wherever you get your podcast from. That's a good way to make sure other people come across the program. John in Adelaide got in touch to say, "I'm 38.

I've been listening to your show for quite a while and loving the new podcast. Think it would be a fantastic idea for Tom to consider publishing all of his Ask Anything questions and answers into a book. It would perhaps flesh out the questions a little and make for a most engaging read.

Thanks for all you do. Keep up the great work." Well, John, we've preempted you. We're going to be releasing an ebook of 12 key questions and answers from Tom from this series.

As a thank you to anyone who can support the show, so more details on that soon. Get yourself signed up to the newsletter and you'll be the first here about that when it's made available. Okay, but that's a special ebook for newsletter subscribers.

And if you aren't already, do get yourself subscribed to that fortnightly newsletter over at [AskNT Wright.com](http://AskNTWright.com). Make sure you hear about these kinds of offers means you also get that link that allows you to send your own questions in for the show. You get automatically entered for new giveaways and we've a new one right now, three more copies of Tom Wright's *The Bible for Everyone*. Him and John Golden Gay have worked together on a fresh translation of the Old and New Testament.

It's a really massive prize. All three of them stacked up on my desk at the moment. All of them signed by Tom will draw three winners for those from our subscriber list at the end of October.

So again, to enter that very simple, just get signed up at [AskNT Wright.com](http://AskNTWright.com). That's the housekeeping out of the way. Let's get into today's edition of the show. Welcome back to

another edition of the AskNT Wright Anything podcast.

We throw all kinds of things at you every couple of weeks, Tom, and today is no different week doing probably one of the biggest questions that has existed since time immemorial, a problem of evil and suffering. I'm not expecting you to solve it necessarily today, but it is posed in some interesting ways today. I suppose whenever we come to do a podcast and questions and you're there as the person answering them, I suppose it's always with the caveat that some things don't really have very neat packaged answers do they? And we can only give people ways to try and think through things and everyone's different as to how they're ultimately going to resolve some of these big questions in their own mind.

Sure. Yeah, that's undoubtedly true. And the question of the problem of evil is the archetypal one.

And I've come to the view that even though we don't have a good answer to the way the question is normally posed, or has been in the last 200 years, 300 years anyway, we do have a very good answer for why we should expect that problem to come up in the way that it does. And that is, if we believe that God is the good and wise creator, then evil doesn't make sense. And that's the point.

And the danger then is if we as clever theologians or philosophers think we can make sense of it, then we're saying that actually God created a world within which, yeah, there's a place for evil and we'll let evil exist so that it can do this and that and the other, which is actually a very dark conclusion to reach. And of course, people can pose the question then in terms of Genesis 3. Where did the snake come from? Why was there a snake in the garden in the first place? There is something then about the freedom of God and the freedom which God gives to creation, which remains a mystery. But I remember when I was teaching in Oxford, one of my fellow examiners one year for the finals paper, set a question, would it be immoral to try to solve the problem of evil? But I remember looking at that and thinking, what an odd thing.

And then I thought, oh, yes, I see. Because if you were able to say, yes, we understand why there is evil. So because it doesn't listen this take, we've solved that one.

Then what you're saying is something pretty drastic about the way the world is. And I bet you can guess who the examiner in question was. No, Coteowi.

Ron Williams. So perhaps we should expect that. And I think that I think Ron would say emphatically actually it would be immoral because you would then be accusing God of having made a world in which this was just part of the way stuff was.

Well, there's one general question which I think sets the scene up really quite well from Deb in Garland, North Carolina, who emails in to say, hello, I'm an atheist who's

interested in faith. Could you explain free will and how it relates to evil? I've had Christian friends explain that we've been given free will to love God, but also free will to do evil. But that makes it sound as if God allows cruelty to happen to innocent people so that he or it or she can be loved.

Am I misunderstanding the concept of free will and the reason behind it? By the way, I've just started your book, Paul for everyone, Romans part one. Oh, well, well, that's funny enough that that will cover some of this ground way. A bit, a bit though I'm delighted if somebody who's a self confess atheist would be starting with a commentary on Romans, a great place to start in all sorts of ways.

Though there might be other places you could start as well, but wherever you start, just find your way through, I would say. Of course, part of the puzzle is that for the atheist, there isn't a problem. For the atheist, there's a problem of good because if the world is simply the random product of blind chance with atoms bouncing off each other or swerving as in epicurianism and just producing new life forms, there is no reason to suppose that we would like the resultant mess.

The problem with natural selection, which is a way of solving that problem, say, well, the survival of the fittest, so we're getting better and stronger and better and stronger, is that the survival of the fittest assumes lots and lots and lots of unfit life forms which just fall by the wayside. If you go that, it's basically new epicurian forms of philosophy, then you really have a problem. Why would we say that anything is good? The answer that the epicurian gives is, "Good simply means I like this." But actually, that's not what most people mean by good.

If somebody tortures somebody else and then when challenged says, "Well, I like doing this," most of us would say, "Sorry, that's not good enough." And even if those, I mean, many people have tried to still tie it to an actualistic account of good saying, "Well, we know that torturing people is bad for the flourishing of our species in an evolutionary sense." Even that I've found doesn't really get to the root of why we disagree with it. It's quite a utilitarian argument. There isn't an eight moral sense and even though that does vary from culture to culture in certain interesting ways, it can't quite be eradicated and one of the things I've tried to argue in the Gifford lectures is that there are certain things like justice, spirituality, relationships, beauty, freedom, truth and power, which all of them have a certain draw across cultures and across time.

But equally, all of them are puzzling because we know that justice matters but we all are inclined to bend it when it's in our own favor and more seems to be in our own favor and same with truth and power and so on. And that's part of the problem of being human in this world and that's part of setting the parameters for why questions like the problem of evil have to be dealt with within this larger whole. It's not enough to say, "Here are these things which we deem to be evil, both human evil and so-called natural evil," though

whether an earthquake is evil or not, it's just what the Earth's crust does.

But it produces suffering. Yeah, of course. People build houses and skyscrapers on it.

Of course, absolutely. And in a sense, though, this specific question is about free will. And there's been a typical defense of evil being that God gives us freedom.

Obviously, that enables us to experience love, relationship with God with each other, all the goods, but it comes at the cost of what we do on the negative side of freedom. Now, part of the problem there is that the puzzle of so-called free will, philosophers have been bashing their heads against this forever. And you end up, if you're not careful, so defending freedom that we do end up as random particles.

We're so free that actually we're just bouncing around and we think we're making choices, but really we are so totally free that we're just random nonsense. And that's why in biblical thought, you tend not to get an emphasis on free will as normally conceived philosophically but on responsibility that humans are given the dignity of making choices. And as we said in a previous podcast about prayer, God seems to want to work in the world through human beings who are learning to make wise, good, healing choices.

The other problem, of course, about free will is that however much you use a free will defense for saying, therefore, we humans mess stuff up and maybe that's an inevitable result of the way God made the world. That doesn't solve earthquakes and tsunamis and volcanoes and so on. And there the problem is, well, the humans had the responsibility to build houses on that point, but often they didn't know.

And this is why, of course, the Lisbon earthquake in 1755 was such a major philosophical disaster in the Western world as well as a physical and human life disaster that it made people think, if there was a God, he wouldn't have let this happen. But here's the really interesting point that I've puzzled over. This has seemed to be a problem in modern Western thought since maybe 1650, 1700, in a way which it never was in earlier Christian thought.

Augustin knows about all these things that happen. And he basically says, yeah, that's just the way the world is, but God is in charge and God will rescue us, et cetera. Now, he often seems to have thought in terms of being rescued from the world and going back to heaven, but in the New Testament as well, Jesus and his first followers knew perfectly well that there were things like earthquakes and volcanoes and that people suffer and die in all sorts of ways.

Life was, as the phrase goes, nasty, brutish and short for a great many people. And they don't regard that as, oh, dear, maybe there isn't a God after all. Rather, they see it in terms of the creator God has set in motion a purpose to rescue the world and to restore

and heal the world so that there's prophetic visions of new creation like the wolf lying down with the lamb and Isaiah and so on.

These are shimmering in the background as saying, there is a God, he is the good creator. There's a real mess at the moment and he has got his own way of working to solve it, which won't necessarily be the way that we might like, but that's partly because we don't understand his ways. And drawing out this part of the question from Deb, which is, I think, where the crux of it is, can perhaps accept that we need free will to choose to love and to be human and all those good things, but says, if it means God allows cruelty to happen to innocent people as the cost of that, I guess Deb is struggling with whether the cost is worth the good, if you like.

And is it a kind of trade-off between you two? Yeah, yeah. And that is the great question, which comes in famously in Dostoevsky and elsewhere. Is this the gamble, the risk that God has taken? And the Christian answer comes back again and again to say, the story that we tell is a story in which God himself has come in person to take the full force of all that evil onto himself.

And one of the, I wrote a little book on the problem of evil, oh, 10 or 15 years ago, called Evil and the Justice of God. And one of the insights which helped me as I was working through that, it's only a short book, was that the gospels themselves tell the story of Jesus and his announcing of God's kingdom and he's going to the cross. But it's not just about Jesus doing that.

As Jesus comes and says, it's time for God to be king, follow me, and it's going to happen. Then evil of all sorts seems to be drawn to him as though to a magnet that there are plotting scribes and Pharisees and there are shrieking demons in the synagogue and some of his own followers get it wrong and plot against him and people are out to get him. And the story, it's like the plot of a movie where you realize that from every corner there are insidious forces and whispering voices in his own head and then the whole thing rushes together, puts him on the cross and then something has happened on the cross through which the power of that evil is broken.

So this isn't a philosophical answer. It's a way of saying that the philosophical question needs to be confronted by the actual Israel narrative reaching its climax in Jesus. And then the church's agenda in the power of the spirit must be to say, okay, if we are the people who celebrate Jesus' victory over the powers of evil, we must be the people in and through whose communities injustice, oppression, wickedness, lies are actually being dealt with.

And that's why it was interesting that it is this Romans part one that Deb is studying because when I think of a passage that deals with that, it is Romans 8 and it is the fact that Paul acknowledges we live in this broken world, this bondage to decay. And yet simply accepts that and says, but we are the ones who are being born for this new world

and God works all things together for the good of those who love us. Yes, and that in Romans 8 we who believe in Jesus are being scooped up into that purpose so that the suffering of Jesus through which the basic victory was won is then reinstanced in the groaning of Jesus followers as we don't know what to pray for as we all were surrounded by so much suffering and rubbish and horrible things.

And we stand there saying, Lord, I'd love to pray about this, I'm not even sure what. And Paul says at that moment the spirit is groaning within us and the Father is listening and in that dialogue of Father and Spirit we are being conformed to the image of the Son. And so this puts the mystery of the Trinity if you like, at the heart of the biblical answer to the problem of evil, not that it's an answer that will satisfy the philosophers, but that it's a way of translating the question into a narrative and historical mode and we are part of that history.

What's the next book that Deb should read once they've completed Paul for everyone? Well, perhaps even in the justice of God. Okay, yeah. Whatever helps.

I hope this answer has helped, Deb, and we wish you the very best in your continuing journeys you explore that. Moving on to a slightly different angle on this, we talked about some of those classic philosophical issues around free will and love and evil and so on. But Paul in Kansas asks, "Many of the theodices I've heard on why God would allow so much suffering in sin in the world are predicated on the necessity and goodness of free will.

But then my question is about the new heaven, a new earth. Is this a literal place where believers are gathered with glorified bodies who love God? Does not this new state of existence also require the presence of free will and would not that in turn necessitate the possibility of another fall or sin itself?" Yeah, that's an interesting question. Are we somehow experiencing free will in a different way in the new creation that doesn't mean the possibility of sin? It is a great question.

And I think the New Testament is very much aware that that question could be raised. And I think, though it's a very dark passage, that that's why towards the end of the book of Revelation that the Satan, the old dragon, is released for a short time and then is finally given his total comeuppance. And I think that's a richly symbolical way of saying, we can imagine that there might be a snake in the new garden, but actually the snake has done his worst and we are quite sure that he's been dispatched.

So that's one possible way in. Another way is to say, this is the problem with our analysis of free will and the use of that free will defense could push in that direction. It's interesting, in America at the moment, much more than in Britain, I think there are quite a lot of younger Christians who are being quite philosophically savvy in a way that their British counterparts probably aren't, but who get sometimes a kind of a rationalistic apologetic, which would include that sort of free will defense.

And I want to say, just be careful what you do with that because it does lead you into strange places. And part of the dynamic of freedom in the New Testament is that, as Paul would say, we are set free from slavery to sin in order to be enslaved to righteousness. And Paul is saying that as a deliberate paradox in Romans 6, but then he fills that out in Romans 8 with the auction of the Holy Spirit.

And the point of the spirit is that when the spirit is at work, then we are truly free. And there is a freedom about that. And this is, if I'm driving a car, I am free, I'm free to steer into the path of an oncoming truck, I'm free to steer off the road into a ditch.

But actually, if I use those freedoms, I will not be free to drive this car anymore. I may not even be free to be alive anymore. And so freedom is a little more complicated than simply I can do what I like.

And you've used that, I know the analogy of music before, that it's only once we have learned and understood the boundaries of how music works, that we can then do the improvisation because we need the boundaries to be free. Exactly. And certainly improvisation or the brilliant violinist or pianist who learns to play the concerto by the long hours of discipline.

I listened to something on the radio the other day, but professional pianist talking about the boringness of practice, take the same phrase over and over and over and backwards and sideways. And he said, "Only when you've done that for a few hours, then when you come to play that concerto, whatever it is, there is a freedom. You can now pour yourself into it knowing that your fingers will do what they should." And this is the paradox of freedom and virtue.

That virtue is a second nature. It's a second freedom, if you like, that you submit yourself to the discipline of learning the stuff in order that you can then freely practice it. And this, I suppose, is the answer we might give to the skeptic who says, "Why would I want to be a Christian? It's all about rules and regulations.

I want to be free." Well, the fact is you're in bondage to something else. We were always master to something or other. And we might still make it God and his... Well, good mind.

That would be quite demanding. But yes, that's part of the appeal of the gospel. If the sun sets you free, you will be genuinely free.

And that's very controversial when Jesus says that to his Judean interlocutors. They say, "We've never been enslaved to anyone," which is an odd thing for first-introduced to say, but they do. And Jesus says, "No, there is a deeper sense of freedom." And therefore, it's really about what does it mean to be human? And being human doesn't mean being free like somebody... I'm supposed to be a Christian.

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I'm supposed to be a Christian. Let's turn to another set of issues now. We talked about the big philosophical question, theological question of evil suffering, free will.

This is a much more practical how we are to live as Christians in the world that we find ourselves in. These questions are both been submitted by Doug Stewart from the Libertarian Christian podcast. If people enjoy this podcast, they may also enjoy Doug's one.

The first question from Doug is, "Tom, many Christians like to use the Bible as a moral guide book and extrapolate from that what their fellow citizens must live by and the debate tends to circle around what good biblical politics looks like. Personal moralism on the one side and corporate moralism on the other. But can Christians really take the scripture and use them to tell the rest of their country what laws they must live under?"

Does this get too close to a theocracy?" Great question.

It looks very different from America than it would in Britain or indeed in France or indeed Germany or indeed Africa, et cetera, et cetera. In other words, I understand where in America things have swung this way on that because by constitution, 240 years ago and every it was, they said, "Church and state separate." That's been very difficult to live with. Many Americans today are now having to come to terms with the fact that actually if you say total separation, then you can have an atheistic state which goes charging off and does its own thing, leaving the Christians who thought they were in quite a friendly environment feeling decidedly discriminated against.

But how do you put that back together without producing the sort of nonsense that many people think were going on under rather fierce Calvinistic legislation earlier on, et cetera, et cetera. In Britain, we don't have that discussion. We have very different one.

We have muddled along with an uneasy alliance, a very British fashion, of church and state which Americans look at and say, "How does that work?" The answer is, "Well, it does and it doesn't." You have to live with it and yes, it's all very peculiar. But we don't have that extreme separation. So then the question comes, actually, kingdom of God is a theocracy, but the problem with theocracy is which theos have you got.

When people hear theocracy, they often think of a big bullying angry God who has given a hotline to him to certain people, call them clergy or whatever, and they will simply tell you God's decisions and you've got to get in line or you have your head chopped off or whatever. And of course, we know that there are some religions and some regimes that have behaved and indeed are behaving like that as we speak. The difference with Christianity is that the theos in question, who is the theos of the theocracy, is the God who is the father of Jesus, who says, "I love you so much.

I'm giving my son to die for you. I love you so much. I'm putting my spirit within you so you can be genuine humans." Now, I like the idea of that Theos running the world.

And I notice that that's what the Sermon on the Mount is about when Jesus says, "Blessed to the poor in spirit, the meek, the mourners, the hungry for justice people, peacemakers, et cetera." That's how theocracy works by ordinary, prayerful people being peacemakers, hungry for justice folk, et cetera, et cetera. And of course, that's bitty and messy because the God who God is doesn't send in the tanks. He sends in that lot the little people who are grieving over the ruin of the world and determined by the spirit to do something about it.

Now, I like that theocracy, but you can't translate that theocracy straight onto the statute book because, as the early Christians knew, there are many religions and life forms out there. And so the church from the beginning was a new sort of politics, which both was and wasn't competing with the existing ones. I mean, by saying Jesus is Lord,

it's quite clear it means Caesar isn't.

But when then Caesar decides three or four centuries down the track that so many of his subjects have become Christians, that he wants to get on board with that, that's a very dangerous and risky moment. But the answer isn't, oh no, please go on persecuting us because we'd be so much more authentic to be a beleaguered minority. The answer has to be, okay, so what's this going to look like? And presumably it means creating a wise and safe environment in which the church can do what it does best, which is looking after the poor, healing the sick, bringing education to everybody, et cetera.

Those three things, by the way, looking after the poor, medicine and education have been part of the church's DNA from the beginning, we think that's odd in the Western world because the state does those now and tells the church to get its hands off. But actually that's what we've always been good at. And it's difficult, isn't it? Because we obviously live in the afterglow of a kind of Christendom in the West as an extent, sort of, where, to some extent, the state did sort of, because it has been shaped by a Judea Christian world, you take on those responsibilities, and then the church sort of forgot that it was also supposed to be doing that.

Sure. Sure. And some of our, you know, I don't know if this is Doug's position, but that, okay, let's let the state do what it does and let the church do what it's supposed to do.

And we shouldn't be too concerned about whether the state does or doesn't reflect Christian values. I think the question then is, this is going to vary enormously from place to place. I remember at the Lambeth Conference 10 or 11 years ago, being with some Christians from Myanmar, and they were talking about whether there are one or two members of the ruling elite, the hunter, or whatever they were, who were closet Christians.

And I remember thinking, oh my goodness, if you live in a country like that, all the questions of church and state and Christian freedom and law and so on look totally different from either if you live in a modeled country like mine, or if you live in a country like America, which had this big, rather rigid, typically 18th century split, you know, very Thomas Jefferson. And I want to say we need to become more savvy at navigating our own histories in those moments and saying, this is where we are now. What does it mean to be followers of Jesus in this place now? And I don't think for most of us in the Western world, this means we'll retreat, do our own thing as church, and let the state do its thing because the church has to have a prophetic voice vis a vis the state.

In John 16, which happened to be my morning reading this morning by Nice Goensons, Jesus says, when the spirit comes, the spirit will convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment and explains that a bit. And I remember, I may have said this to you before, for years thinking, what a great thing the spirit holding the world to account. And then it suddenly dawns on me.

Jesus doesn't give the spirit in general terms. Jesus gives the spirit to his followers so that his followers can hold up the mirror to power and say sin and righteousness and judgment. And if you want to know what that looks like in John's gospel, you read John 18 and 19 where Jesus confronts Pontius Pilate and argues with him about kingdom and truth and power.

And Pilate eventually kills him, but in the great irony of the gospel, that is the victory of the kingdom, Jesus is king of the Jews, because thereafter new creation is launched and Pontius Pilate is yesterday's man, as it were. We only know him because of the creed of the Christian church. Well, pretty much.

So that is the church's vocation to figure out what it would mean to do vis a vis our own governments, be they benign or not benign, what Jesus was doing to Pontius Pilate. One more question here from Doug. If declaring Jesus's Lord means implicitly that Caesar is not, how might Christ followers live today in a world of American and European empires that are somewhat more democratic than the Roman Empire? They may be, but they may not be.

The Romans voted all right, but there was a system and you had to be rather rich and powerful to get in on the system. That does sound rather like what some of us see when we cross the pond at our American friends that in order to be a senator, you have to be a millionaire, in order to be a president, you have to raise multi-millions. Yes, it's voted for, but there's all sorts of constraints.

One of the things I pray for regularly is that God will raise up a new generation on both sides of the Atlantic, of wise leaders who will be credible and voteable for in a way which actually of late has not been true in my country, and perhaps some Americans might say has not been entirely true for them either. Thank you for tackling a wide range of questions. On the podcast today, Tom, it's been a pleasure as always, and I hope you've enjoyed listening as well.

Don't forget you can ask more questions of Tom, or you will be recording some more sessions of the podcast soon, so feel free to get them in and avail yourself of all the other bonus content that's available from the website when you subscribe to our newsletter. That's all available from AskNTRight.com, but for now, thank you, Tom. Thank you.

Thank you very much. Thanks for being with us on today's show. Next time, we'll be answering more of your pastoral questions that have been sent in.

Do make sure you're subscribed for the regular newsletter, bonus content, and that prize draw, one of three signed copies of Tom's Fresh Translation of Scripture, the Bible for everyone. Sign up at AskNTRight.com to make sure you're in the draw by the end of October. And if you want to join me at another kind of ThinkFest out in the USA, do look

out for Unbelievable Live in LA.

Two great days of conversation about Christian faith in Costa Mesa, California, on the 11th and 12th of October, featuring, among others, Professor John Lennox. That's at unbelievable.live. Thanks for being with us, and see you next time.

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