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#71 Should the story of the woman caught in adultery be in our Bible?

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

NT Wright answers listener questions on the New Testament, including a question about the reliability of John 8:1-11, Jesus on prayer and petition, and whether Paul made a mistake about the promise to Abraham in Romans 4. · Get all the video seminars from Unbelievable? 2021 · Support the show – give from the USA or Rest of the world · For bonus content, the newsletter, prize draws and to ask a question sign up at www.askntwright.com · Exclusive podcast offers on Tom's books and videos from SPCK & NT Wright Online · Subscribe to the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast via your preferred podcast platform

Transcript

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 5 Ways to Connect with God. And you can download it for free right now at [premier insight dot org slash resources](http://premierinsight.org/resources).

I think you'll find refreshment for your soul. So go right now to [premier insight dot org slash resources](http://premierinsight.org/resources) and download your copy. That's [premier insight dot org slash resources](http://premierinsight.org/resources).

Hello good to have you with me. It's Justin Briley, premier's theology and apologetics editor welcoming you to another edition of the show brought to you by premier SBCK and NT right online. And today Tom's going to be looking at your questions on the New Testament you've sent in a variety of questions and he'll be doing his best to answer some of them.

By the way if you do enjoy today's show then do check out our show page at [ask nt right dot com](http://askntwright.com) where you can sign up to ask a question yourself and you can find more

resources from the show as well as ways to give. And we do love it when you tell others about the podcast especially if you could write and review us wherever you get your podcast from. Myo in Nigeria got in touch to say NT right has helped me see things in a new way.

I always learned something new when I listened his answers to questions from his answers to questions you can tell that he is a writer as well. Thank you very much Myo. Great to know you're listening from Nigeria and wherever you're listening from do let others know about the podcast by rating and reviewing it helps others to see it as well.

For now let's dive into your questions today. Well welcome back to another edition of the show and we're really getting into the core of what we often do on this show. We often discuss cultural issues, pastoral issues but today we're doing the New Testament and we've got a few questions that have come in on this.

There are so many so many questions to always choose from when it comes to questions around the gospels and other parts of the New Testament Tom but we'll see what comes up on today's show. Let's dive straight in and this is from Seth who asks thanks for your efforts in the podcast. Supremely helpful on a regular basis both in my life and those with whom I share my life with.

My question is in regards to the story of the woman caught in adultery and this of course is in John's gospel I believe. My question to Tom relates to your role as a translator and interpreter and your understanding of the inspiration in regards to this text. Many Christians don't really care nor understand the notes within their Bibles stating that this story is exempt from the earliest and best manuscripts.

Furthermore it's often a bailout from believers when attempting to justify a morally questionable behaviour or set of beliefs. The same is true for usage of many popular level preachers and teachers but Tom what do you do with this passage? Why is it still in our Bibles? Why do leaders and Bible teachers avoid teaching their congregations about its textual nature? Are we to consider it canonical and thus inspired when it comes down to it? It wasn't in the original manuscripts so how can we keep it and at the same time maintain integrity? I'm not trying to bait you here just the sake of drawing out answers and then there are some further questions around inspiration which we'll perhaps leave for later but that's the core of the question. The woman caught in adultery it is a wonderful story Tom and many people will know it well and that Jesus as the people come to stone her says he was without sin cast the first stone and they all go away and he says where are your accusers and go and sin no more and so on.

I'm probably not doing it justice there but that's just going on memory of the story. But as Seth says here there is a note in most Bibles you'll find a note saying this story doesn't appear in the earliest of most reliable manuscripts of John's Gospels so should it be there at all on that basis and what do we do with its status is it's therefore inspired if

it's got this sort of caveat around it? What are your thoughts on all of this conundrum Tom? Thank you and thanks to Seth from South Africa for the question. This is a classic example of the way in which we have to look sooner or later at the early manuscripts and that's a very complicated issue.

I don't know if everyone who sees this podcast literally sees the podcast but if you can see at the back of my Greek Testament there is a whole list of all the early manuscripts and it goes on page after page after page. I'm scrolling through three four five six pages and it's just massive. Now when the Reformers translated the Bible in the sixteenth century they had very few of these manuscripts hardly any and then over the last particularly two or three centuries more and more and more have been discovered with all sorts of bits and pieces of the New Testament in them.

Some of them going back as early we think as the second century some of them the third or fourth century there's lots from the third and fourth century many of them only containing little snippets little bits of this and that but then some of the great ones containing more or less everything that we know as the New Testament and often sometimes confusingly other things as well that we might not have expected there like for instance the wisdom of Solomon or some of the books that we think of as the quote apostolic fathers. So the manuscript tradition often throws up all sorts of puzzling and perplexing questions to us and we run into this again and again. My own take on John 8 it's John 8 verses 1 to 11 I think isn't it with the lead in from the end of John 7 it would be John 7 53 which is a kind of transition and then 8 1 through to 8 11.

My own take is this it does feel awkward where it is in that it seems to interrupt the flow of John's story at that point and it may be that because of the awkwardness the literary awkwardness some scribes had moved it or maybe some scribes had put it in there where it wasn't originally there however John's gospel has quite a few awkward transitions and some people say that's because it was tied together with string later on other people say that's because it wasn't edited very much but it was as John left it and it was not really smoothed out in the way that some other writings were so you see these debates go on and frankly they don't bother me that much because the story here is such a characteristic story of Jesus and by the way we normally talk about it as the woman the woman caught in adultery but as a friend of mine said to me once it actually ought to be called the men caught in hypocrisy but yeah why have we called it that when in fact the real villains of the piece are these angry men who are going to take out their own frustrations on this solo woman who was only one part in in a two-part event we assume but anyway that that's that's kind of moral question but then my best guess is that it was somewhere in the tradition very early on and that because it was apparently quite shocking in that so many people in the early church really were worried about what is this opening the floodgates to some will have cautiously removed it and then others will have put it sometimes occurs in other places I think when the new English Bible was first published they put the they put this story um tacked it on to the

end of the gospel rather than putting it in the middle as it is here so um these textual issues sometimes worry people who really I remember hearing Michael Ramsey once talk about people who think that the Bible descended from heaven in black leather covers complete with maps um as you know if that's your view of the Bible then that needs shaking up a bit but that doesn't mean that it isn't the book that God wanted us to have um and in a sense the warts and all nature of it the fact that there are textual puzzles and bits which look as if somebody missed them out or transcribed them differently or whatever that's a way of saying this is a book the church has lived with and struggled with and we have to live with it and struggle with it as well I mean it's very interesting for instance in the passages about divorce divorce and remarriage in Matthew 5 or Matthew 18 for instance um or or Mark 10 that there are lots and lots of textual variations as though the early church is trying to say we need to give pastoral guidance on this perhaps what Jesus meant was this or that or the other whereas in some other great moral questions there are no textual variants at all because they're all absolutely up to speed so all this is going on and it doesn't mean we don't have the book God wanted us to have it means every generation is called to wrestle with it afresh and say so how do we then live with this text now and use the best wisdom from earlier commentators to make it our own I'm sure that simply still leaves lots of questions unanswered but that will be the starting point that I would have. Now I think that was really helpful thank you so much Tom. Let's go to another person's question on another gospel this is Luke but it's from Ada in Romania lovely to know that you're listening in Romania Ada and Ada says I don't understand very well what Jesus is teaching in Luke 11 verses 5 to 12 is it really insisting prayers a petition will be answered or does he mean only particular requests for instance those we already know are part of the coming of his kingdom or is will being done on earth like in Luke 18 does he only mean here we should not give up praying for justice for instance I've always struggled with petitionary prayers I resonate with asking for wisdom patients etc to get through a difficulty but I find it hard to ask God to change the difficulty what if it's not his will what would be the point of insisting wouldn't an attitude of thy will be done be better to prepare me to accept whatever comes or more helping in seeing what God wants me from me in those very circumstances rather than praying to escape them of course this excludes the really desperate situations in which one can only cry for deliverance and just perhaps for the context of this let's just read Luke 11 5 to 12 and again if I'll do it for my NRSV Tom this it puts it this way there and he said to them suppose one of you has a friend and you go to him at midnight and say to him friend lend me three loaves of bread for a friend of mine has arrived and I've nothing to set before him and he answers from within do not bother me the door has already been locked and my children are with me in bed I cannot get up and give you anything I tell you even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs so I say to you ask and it will be given to you search and you will find knock and the door will be open for you for everyone who asks receives and everyone who searches finds and for everyone who knocks the door will be opened is

there anyone among you who if your child asked for a fish will give a snake instead of a fish or if the child asked for an egg will give a scorpion if you then who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children how much more will the heavenly father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him I went a little bit beyond Ada's particular verses but it gives a sense of the the passage there and and yes it does sound like Jesus is saying ask and you'll get it you know quite quite blatant almost and I can see why Ada struggles with that you know that's not the way it tends to work in practice and she almost feels you know embarrassed asking in that director sort of way so what's your wisdom on this Tom yes yes thanks this is this is a constant puzzle which many people have quite rightly wrestled with and I think we we tend to in one direction or another but this is very crisp sharp teaching and this parable of the friend at midnight is is very clear that the friend actually is settling down to sleep all the children in bed please don't bother me but nevertheless we've got to do this and there are many many stories down through Christian history of great saints men and women who have said in effect right I'm going to take this on and I'm going to pray for this particular situation this particular person and I'm jolly well not going to give up and I remember discussing this with my spiritual director many years ago and and he said to me yes something like this you pray about it every day as part of your daily prayers and you put it before the Lord and sometimes you will get the answer within two or three days sometimes it may be two or three years but you just mustn't give up and sometimes of course the answer will be that as you pray for it gradually God opens your eyes to see this may not be the best thing for you to be praying for right now there may be other things and sometimes it's as though God takes all the energy of that prayer which I believe is a spirit given energy I think the spirit stir the Holy Spirit stirs us up to pray and even if we because of our minds and our wandering ideas are misdirected God will take that energy and use it to bring about something else which is in fact the thing that he wants for us and I've seen that many times in my own life and that of others that people who pray fervently for a particular thing that is not wasted even if it was in fact not God's best will at the time because then something else will happen and they will look and say that is so much better than what I was thinking of and praying for thank you Lord but you didn't give me the specific thing I was praying for but you're now giving me this instead and and I think that is so many many times and I think we today like Ada and bless you Ada I very much hear what you say we maybe have tried it perhaps when we were young and prayed for this or that or the other and it didn't happen or prayed for somebody to recover from serious illness and then they died anyway what are we to say about that part of the answer is that the New Testament is full of that puzzle itself that the early church prayed for this and it happened and they prayed for that and it didn't and the climax of that is of course Jesus himself praying with great drops of blood sweating from his head and face praying that somehow the cup would pass from him and the answer is no and if even Jesus earnestly wanted one particular thing to which the answer was no then we shouldn't be surprised if sometimes that's going to be so for us as well because we are called to share his passion to share his pain but yes at the heart of it of course and Luke goes this way is the prayer

for the Holy Spirit just like later on in Luke's gospel in Luke 17 he talks about the prayer for justice the people of God longing for God to put the world right it is always right to pray that God will put the world right and that he will apply that to the particular situations of which we're aware and how God uses that is his business I think we need to err on the side of being more specific I'm not terribly good at doing that myself but again and again I think that's what we should be doing take this seriously and then make the modifications within it rather than saying no no Jesus can't have meant it we just have to pray vaguely I think God likes specifics yes and and I think maybe that just in terms of the the parable that is used of the the friend who is yes I'm willing to get up initially and but because the friend keeps bothering him he eventually does it I mean is Jesus using that to say you know if you're hard enough God will eventually be bothered or is it no God's not even like that God's willing and ready like a father to to answer your prayer yes but obviously that comes with with that caveat of it may not be answered in quite the way you're thinking and so yes well well quite and I've often reflected on the situation of devout Jews in between if you like Malachite and Matthew in the last few centuries BC where there are many devout Jews and we have some of their writings who are longing for God to put the world right to put Israel right to get rid of sin to enable people to love him properly etc and they are praying for that and longing for that and finally after 400 years plus we get Simeon and Anna in the temple seeing this little baby brought in and they realize the prayers have been answered at last and I think of Israel waiting all that time devoutly and longing and the letter to the Hebrews says you know there are many many people who are longing to see this thing and now we have this revelation and Jesus himself says many prophets and and devout people long to see what you disciples see and they didn't see it and now you do in other words don't be surprised that you have to wait and pray for something which you may not even see the answers to in your own lifetime sometimes God comes right out and surprises us and it happens the next day or the next week sometimes we have to wait a long time that's his business not out thank you so much hi there before we go any further I want you to know about a very special ebook we're releasing this month called critical race theory and Christianity this ebook draws from two unbelievable podcasts with Neil Shenvie, Rassalbury, Owen Strand and Jermaine Marshall addressing questions like has so-called woke ideology taken over parts of the church or is white privilege a problem in the church and is critical race theory compatible with the gospel I'd love for you to have a copy of this powerful ebook as my special thanks to you for your gift to premiere insight today the ministry that brings you this podcast each week you see all of the conversations insight resources and encouragement that you get from premiere insight programs like this one are only possible because of the support of wonderful friends like you without your generosity none of this would be possible so please go to premiere insight dot org slash give and make a donation today that's premiere insight dot org slash give and don't forget to download our newest ebook critical race theory and Christianity as my special thank you okay final question erin in Iowa this is a biggie and you won't be able to do it justice in the time we've got left on but we'll give it our best

shot because this is on Romans and specifically erin wants to know Romans 4:13 states the promise that he Abraham would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith but says erin as i read it when looking at the story in Genesis 15 god promises Abraham their neighbor a reward which is presumably the land Abraham wonders what reward can be given to him since it will be given to someone who is not his descendant but god reassures Abraham he will have a descendant to pass the reward on to by promising him his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky Abraham believes god and it is reckoned to him as righteousness so the promise of land and descendants is made to Abraham and it's because he believed god would make good on those promises that Abraham was credited with righteousness but Paul says the promise came to Abraham through his faith when clearly god already planned to reward him before Abraham had faith that god would give him his reward so did Paul make a mistake ask erin and goes on to say is the reward spoken of in Genesis 15 referring to the descendants only or and so after his faith in god for that promise is god giving him the extra reward of land as well i admit a case could be made for this solution but it only fits if we read Genesis 15 in light of Romans 4:13 with Romans 4:13 set aside it seems much more likely that god has a reward of land to give to Abraham and reward of descendants on top of that am i nit picking or overthinking this erin so i don't have everyone listening followed all of that but give us a sense of what you think erin's getting at here Tom and what your solution to this problem might be I'm afraid I feel about this question like the famous answer given by somebody in Ireland who once asked for instructions said well if I was going to Dublin I wouldn't be starting from here in other words I want to shift the whole thing back a few gears and in order to explain this properly would take an hour or so and Romans 4 is one of the most fascinating one of the sort of top 15 maybe most fascinating chapters in Paul and I have of course written about it quite a lot elsewhere and if erin doesn't have this already then there is a long article by me on the Paul and the patriarch it's called which is in the collection of articles that I published some years ago called Pauline Perspectives and also it's discussed at length in my commentary on Romans and also in my big book Paul and the Faithfulness of God so anything I say now is just a little pointer towards those much fuller discussions I think two things stand out from the way that erin said all this and it's all I don't mind about nit picking and overthinking we've got to do that we've got to delve down these things are deep and rich but the point of the Abraham story in Genesis you know what Paul makes of it is what Paul makes of it the point of the Abraham story in Genesis is that the world has gone horribly wrong the story from Genesis 3 to Genesis 11 runs from Adam and Eve and the fall and then the first murder Cain murdering Abel and then then the Noah episode and then ultimately the Tower of Babel and the whole world is a mess and then in order to reclaim his world for himself God chooses Abraham and the fascinating thing about this is that God wants to think about land and family and so God chooses a childless nomad and says now this is how I'm going to do it which is almost funny as though right from the start it is of course all of grace it's all of God's gift it's all of God's plan so that's the the first and most important

thing of the reward which God says to Abraham fear not Abraham I am your shield your reward should be very great at the beginning of of Genesis 15 is what's picked up by Paul in chapter four verse four where he talks about the reward to the one who works his reward is not calculated thus but thus in other words it's it's not for Abraham about Abraham earning it it's about God's gift but how does God's gift then get received and that's the so the first thing I want to say is God's plan is to reclaim the whole world so when Paul says the promise to Abraham and his descendant that they should inherit the world indicates already what you have very clearly in scripture in Psalm 2 for instance that when God said to Abraham here's this land this is an advance beginning of a claim on the whole creation God says to David I will and David's son I will make the nations your possession the ultimate parts of the world your inheritance which is the extension of the Abrahamic promise as God always intended and for that God wants to give Abraham not just the family Isaac Jacob etc but an uncountable family of descendants like the stars of heaven and Paul is quite clear that this involves Abraham believing that God would give him this vast uncountable family who would then inherit the world as Jesus said blessed to the meek they will inherit the earth and so this all depends on a view of Genesis which Paul shares which is that this isn't about somebody being justified in so going to heaven as in some traditional western theology but about God's people being the advance God of the family through whom God will reclaim the whole world and fill it with his own personal presence so then when Aaron talks about Abraham being credited with righteousness we have to read that phrase in the way that Genesis intends it and the way that Paul intends it which is that being reckoned as righteous has to do with God making the covenant the only other place in scripture that that occurs is in Psalm 106 where Phineas interposes with his spear with the people who are being wicked in the camp and the Psalm says that was reckoned to him as righteousness from that day onwards every other time Phineas' story is told in the book of Numbers right the way on through Jewish tradition it is always about God making the covenant with Phineas so reckoned as righteousness is a shorthand in Hebrew and then Paul is picking it up for God establishing the covenant and so God establishes the covenant and the marker the thing which marks Abraham out as God's covenant partner as people have sometimes said is his belief and so Paul is saying therefore the children of Abraham who will inherit the promise of the ones who share Abraham's faith faith which as he goes on to say is that God will give life where there is no life God will give life out of death as Abraham believed so we believe in Jesus who has put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification so this involves the rethinking of promise covenant land family justification itself I think I've taken about seven minutes to do that I'm sorry that's so brief there is of course much much more to be said but that's for starters yeah well do check out Aaron for more some of the some of the the particular resources that Tom has mentioned already including obviously the commentary on Romans might be a good place to start but also some of the others I'll try and include them in links from today's show Tom Tom thank you so much for your time god bless you all the very best and thank you for answering so many of these questions today and we will see you on

another edition of the podcast very soon thanks so much for being with us on today's show just a reminder that our show partner NT Right Online are offering a free ebook from Tom on the book of Acts to podcast listeners and there are links to that in the show notes from today and if you want more from today's show do go to our page at ask NT Right dot com you'll find links there if you want to unbelievable dot live where you can get all the high definition teaching from Tom from this year's unbelievable conference but you can also find links to further shows further resources and indeed ways to support the show as well if you'd like to do that thanks for being with us this week next week really exciting show for you bringing Tom into dialogue with Richmond wanderer he's a pastor out in Uganda in a special show brought to you in partnership with compassion international see you for that next time

[buzzing]