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#172 Is the World doomed? (replay)

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

From May 2020. In another show recorded pre-lockdown, Tom answered questions from listeners on whether the world is getting better or worse, on poverty and economic justice, and what climate change activism means for the theology of new creation. •

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Transcript

[Music] The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast. Welcome to Ask NT Wright Anything. I'm Peter Byram standing in Vareth Jackson while she's away on holiday.

Today we go back to May 2020, where Tom answered questions from listeners on whether the world is getting better or worse. On poverty and economic justice and what climate change activism means for the theology of new creation.

[Music] Welcome back to the programme.

Got a really interesting one today. Looking at questions around global justice and the climate crisis. Tom joins me as usual here on the programme and you've invested a lot of your life in helping Christians in today's world understand that world of the first century.

But only because you want it to impact today's world. What are some of the key areas where you think the church today, Christians today, need to understand the story of fresh so that we can tell it to today's generation? I think it's difficult for people to get their minds out of the way that we ask key questions and into the way that the key questions were framed in the first century. But unless we make that effort the whole time, then we are going to be committing what we call anachronisms.

That is just transposing things back almost as stupidly as if we imagined that they had mobile phones in the first century and that sort of thing. Particularly people sometimes say to me, "Oh Tom, you want us to imagine this great narrative that you say they were all believing?" But that's very difficult. And I say, "Well actually, if you don't do that, you will assume that they have the Western Christian narrative, which is, 'How do I go to heaven?' And you will assume that that's what Jesus and his friends were talking about." And it really, really wasn't.

And if you read the Jewish documents from the first century, whether it's the Dead Sea Scrolls or the Chosephus or other books like what we call "Forthesser", which is written shortly after the time of Jesus, they're not talking about how we go to heaven. They're talking about how the God of creation is going to put everything right on this world and what we could and should be doing right now either to anticipate that or in some sense to implement that. It's about the revelation of God's saving faithfulness to his creation and his covenant.

And that's a very different set of questions from what most people think religion ought to be about. Part of the problem, of course, is that the modern Western idea of religion is itself very much a modern construct. And so trying to get people to unthink what they just assume is really very difficult.

And it's only when you start to deconstruct things, 'Oh, I see. So you mean...!' And at the heart of it is something I've said before on this show that we assume that the whole point of religion, if you believe in it, is to go to heaven eventually and be with God if there is a God. But actually in the New Testament, as with the Jewish world in general, it's about God wanting to bring heaven and earth together.

And God wanting graciously to come and live with his human creatures and to be at home with them. That's what Genesis 1 and 2 is all about. And that's what it's supposed to be all about.

At the end of the book of Revelation says the dwelling of God is with humans, not the dwelling of humans is with God the other way around. And once you start to put everything that way up, then all sorts of other things you know, click, click, click into place in a way which they don't do otherwise. I often find when people have read your book, when they understand more of the context and what this kingdom was about, that it gives them the confidence actually to go and talk with their friends and skeptical colleagues because it no longer seems like some bolt-on, you know, that you ought to get this life insurance and carry on with your life as it is.

But actually it says we're part of a much bigger story and I want to invite you into that story. Exactly. I was preaching at a confirmation the other night, which was very exciting with four very bright young people in Oxford College being confirmed.

And the readings that were chosen set me up to say that God in Jesus and through the gospel is already doing new creation all around us if we have eyes to see. And you are now invited to become part of that project. And in Lesley Newbinger's phrase about the gospel being public truth, I said to these four, I'm not sure how they took it, that you are now part of the public face of this public truth.

And actually to think of the Christian vocation like that, I find very exciting, dramatic, challenging. Well, let's get into today's discussion, Tom. The climate crisis and global justice is my catch all phrase for this.

Lots of questions that have come in over the last few months about the climate. Obviously we're seeing all kinds of movements going on around the world, the extinction rebellion movement, this young lady Greta Thunberg who's caught the imagination of so many people and so on. So lots of questions here and we'll just see where we can get to and then move on to some other issues.

Jonathan in Phoenix, Arizona says, I want to know generally what Tom thinks about where we are in human history and where we're going, considering the advent of artificial intelligence, global warming, the continuing rise in population and the unprecedented polluting of the environment. What does Tom make of it all? So I suppose, and we'll tease that out in various other ways as these questions come in. I mean, I think the first thing to say is that because of what I believe about Jesus, I believe that God, the Creator, is sovereign over the present and the future as He has been over the past.

And that there have been many, many times in human history, I think of the black death and things like that. When people really did think that all humans were going to be wiped out and that the whole world was shuddering to a horrible halt. And of course, when I was young, there were great marches and great anxieties and all sorts of things.

CND, it was like nuclear weapons. That we were going to blow the world up. And I want to say that was a real problem because we did and we still do have the capacity to do that.

And if we've forgotten that that's a problem, then we forget it our peril. But it's almost as though in every generation, people trundle along thinking the world is going OK. And then they suddenly think, "Oh my goodness, there's this problem, there's that problem." And it's as though, and I think this is a, to do with Western mindset in the 17th and 18th and 19th centuries.

And we lurch from an over-optimism. Oh, we're just getting on fine, we're having peace and prosperity and et cetera. To an over-pessimism.

Oh my goodness, it's suddenly all going horribly wrong. At the same time, there are real

challenges and we really have to rise to the occasion. And one of the things I pray about regularly is for today's generation of younger scientists coming through schools and universities to discern and discover fresh ways of, say, dealing with that horrible, great island of waste plastic in the middle of the Pacific or dealing with all the things that we're currently doing which are making the planet warmer.

I mean, some years ago, people worried terribly about the Gulf Stream being switched off, which would mean that here, where we're sitting in London, but never mind, further north, we would have a new ice age because it's only the Gulf Stream that stops us from being like Northern Newfoundland, which is where we are in terms of latitude. Now, you know, funny things have happened before and maybe that would happen again, but that would precipitate enormous crises on all sorts of fronts. So I want to say we need to be doing the research because part of the Christian belief in human responsibility is that God wants us to take care of our world, but the danger with some of what I hear at the moment is that it's panicky.

It's just, "Oh, dear, we've got to stop everything now." And I want to say no. We should say our prayers. We should do the science.

We should study it very carefully. And yes, there are some nettles that have to be grasped and maybe Greta Thunberg has put her finger on. Some of them, and if that's what you do with nettles, take the grasp and I'm sure.

But there is a danger that that then gets bundled up with a general kind of, again, the establishment package and suddenly it becomes part of a whole raft of causes and you're either all on that side or you're all on that side. And I think in America, particularly, that's a problem at the moment, where the question of, do you even believe in climate change? Sure. It is part of a right and left package which really doesn't help.

And in a way has been set up in that way by the President, the incumbent currently as President. And Prescott sort of has a question on that. Prescott's in Philadelphia in Pennsylvania and says, "I'm sure you've heard of the recent news in the US with President Donald Trump and his Twitter beef, Twitter spat 16-year-old Greta Thunberg and then also Pastor Robert Jeffress going on air saying that she only needs to read Genesis 9 and look at a rainbow to feel better about her future and that climate change is an imaginary problem.

It's not hard to see that this is bad theology, but it's not quite clear to me what exactly would be good theology. It seems pretty undeniable that there are significant changes happening and that the world could look drastically different in the next few decades if we don't take new measures to better care for God's creation. But I'm not sure how God's sovereignty over creation fits in here would God actually let it get to the point where humans are no longer physically able to inhabit the earth, for instance? And how does this all fit into the context of God renewing creation? So big questions there.

And I have often also seen that sort of theology which basically says, we don't need to worry because God's going to, you know, it'll all burn hands. Well, either you don't need to worry because it'll all burn or you don't need to worry because God would never let it get that bad anyway. And those two are incompatible with one another, but people seem to embrace the one or the other quite happily.

I first ran into this, I made a sense before, many years ago when I was doing some lectures on Jesus in Thunder Bay, Ontario, the northwestern end of the Great Lakes and the church where I was lecturing, they'd asked me to speak about Jesus, but actually what they were really worried about was people from America who were telling them that they shouldn't worry about pollution, about acid rain particularly, because the whole world was going to be blown up by an Armageddon fairly soon, and that if you were worried about that it showed you being worldly instead of ever- And you should be concentrating on saving souls rather than carrying things out. Exactly. And I mean, I'd not met that.

This was in the early 1980s and this was quite new to me, that attitude. But two things I want to say, one is yes, we are called to care for the world. That's quite clear in Genesis, and if you're going to quote Genesis 9 about rainbows, there's a lot of other bits of Genesis as well, particularly one and two, where humans are to be looking after God's garden, and that is reaffirmed in Psalm 8, where God has made humans to be under him sovereign over the world and to take responsibility, and that is reaffirmed in Romans 8, but in Romans 8 you get the other half of that, which is that the creation will be set free from its slavery to decay, to share the liberty of the glory of the children of God, or rather to inherit the freedom which comes when God's children are glorified.

Now, part of the point of that is that God is going to do for the whole of creation at the last, what he did for Jesus at Easter. In other words, give him, he gave Jesus the new body, a new immortal physical body. God will renew the whole creation so that the earth will be full of the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

What sort of a process of dying and rising again has to be gone through for that to take place? We are not told. I've often said all our language about the future is a set of signposts pointing into a fog. They may be true signposts, but they don't tell you it's not a photographic description of what it'll be like as we get there.

So somehow we have to hold those two in sort of tension, and the second one gives us this secure faith that the God who raised Jesus is going to make all things well at the end. And that's not whistling in the dark, that's rooted in what we believe about Jesus. But second, in the meantime, we are to be people of new creation who are not just beneficiaries but also agents of new creation.

That is we are to take responsibility for our world. So we're not just to sit back and say, "Oh well, if the planet warms up and we can't live in it anymore, too bad." And that's why

I say we should be praying for and seeking to foster brilliant young scientists from whatever context who are able to analyze in new ways where the problems really are. To see what we've been doing wrong, particularly since the Industrial Revolution.

It's very interesting because this is all part of postmodernity that the Industrial Revolution said, "We can now make anything, drive anything, do anything, we can take over the world." And Western Europe and America has basically done that. And just as ideologically there's a big cost, so in terms of ecologically there's a big cost. And I fear that the thing about Trump and Thunberg is simply one more manifestation of a political standoff of people in America and elsewhere saying, "Don't talk to us about this because it's going to get in the way of our nice industrial plans." And the answer is, "Hang on, just as you were wrong about the black-white issues in the '50s and early '60s in America, and maybe you're wrong about this too, there are big issues here about how we do our total projects." And so those need to be addressed and not swept under the carpet within a framework of saying, "God is sovereign in the God who raised Jesus, will heal his world." I think some people sort of, because the language around this has got quite apocalyptic almost in itself, that's where some of these questions are coming from.

Tim Nottingham has a similar question saying, "Some scientists are even speculating that human civilization might collapse in the coming decades go extinct." And it's asking, "Well, if that is a possibility, how does that fit with the idea of God's coming kingdom and new creation and will God intervene? Is that something God would never allow to happen to you?" And I mean, just as this is like the macro version of what happens when somebody is facing the sickness and possible death of somebody they love, how could God let this beautiful person die so young, whatever it is? And the answer is, you say your prayers, you call in the doctors, but sometimes the people you love do die, and it seems to be ridiculous that they should. So I don't want to say God could and would never let that happen, but I do believe that if that was the way that we had to go through, in order to get to the new creation, I find that deeply counterintuitive actually, because it seems to me Paul in 1 Corinthians is talking about being transformed, rather than there being a moment when the whole creation collapses into chaos again. At the same time, we are given responsibility, we are given a vocation to look after creation, and it's something that as Christians we should be in the forefront of doing, not in a panicky way, sometimes in Christians we get highly moralistic of it.

Have you changed your light bulbs yet? And we said, "Well, we're doing all that stuff, but let's do it within a celebration of God's goodness and the arrival of new creation." I mean, interestingly, Natalie in Australia picks up on that sense, she labels it, "What do you make of, quote-unquote, climate anxiety?" I'm saying there's no doubt we've polluted the earth, but how radical should our response be? And as you say, there is a certain feeling of almost panic in some of the importance. Should Christians step back a bit from that in your view? Is it without sort of skirting over the fact that there are obvious serious issues that are making it? Yes, I mean, there's that old line in Isaiah

which says, you know, "The one who believes will not make haste, or not panic." And there is a sense of calm faith and confidence, even when, and again, the Old Testament is full of this, even then there are no signs of hope at the moment, but we hope in the God who we know, who has done X, Y, and Z in the past, and who will be trusted, is trustworthy to be faithful in the future. And at the same time, if I was in Australia with the huge fires that they've been recently, now, I do not know the cause of those fires.

Some people say that there were some arsonists who were at work. Why? I mean, goodness, that's just unbelievable, but I think in Southern California as well, at the same time, there do seem to be some features of what's going on, which really are extremely concerning, and certainly the storms we've seen in the UK recently, which have increased far beyond what I remember when I was a kid. And of course, the melting of the ice caps on both ends of the planet and the melting of some of the great glaciers in the world, there are huge and undeniable signs of major change.

How much these are simply part of a slow, to-and-fro, ebb and flow? I simply don't know if this is not my field, but it seems to me those are good questions to ask, not in a panicky way, but in a proper scientific way. Part of the problem here is that some people, in some cultures and some parts of America, not all, are taught to distrust science in general. On the grounds that if you say science, it means you're a Darwinian, and therefore you don't believe the Bible or whatever.

And that's just silly, you know. If you are very sick or someone you love is very sick, please go to the hospital and trust the best science there is to deal with your sickness. And don't say, "Oh, you must be a Darwinian because you're going to hospital." Today's show is brought to you in partnership with SBCK, the UK publisher of Tom's Material, and two new books you may be interested in, *The New Testament in its World*, an introduction to the history literature and theology of the first Christians, in which Enterite and Mike Bird provide a thorough overview of the New Testament for students, church leaders, and indeed everyday Christians.

And another brand new book from Tom, *History and Eschatology, Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology*. It's the book version of Tom's Gifford lectures of which Miraslav Volf said, "A creative and arresting contribution to natural theology." This book argues for the plausibility of the Christian vision and the relationship between God and the world by taking seriously the history of Jesus Christ. Both books available at sbckpublishing.co.uk to search for Enterite.

[Music] In a related question, Donald in Somerset asks, "Your book, *Simply Good News*, was a dramatic revelation to me, but I'm worried that I've read too much into it. Can you be clearer about the social state of the world today? You seem ambiguous about the idea that the world is now a better place than it's ever been. I can't remember your phrase as a friend has borrowed my copy." But you quoted Stephen Pinker and doubted if the world

is better.

This has left me doubtful about expressing myself and goes on to say here, "I never understood what the kingdom of God was all about after listening to preachers for over 60 years. You have completely convinced me that when Jesus stood up in the temple and announced his mission statement, it is becoming literally true. I believe the world is a happier place than it's ever been because his death and resurrection changed people, but I'd be very grateful if you could help my nagging doubts." So, yes, where do you begin on that? That's absolutely fair enough.

The trouble is that, and this is what Stephen Pinker is picking up on. He's a Harvard professor who's written two or three books recently about this. He says that the world is a better place because of all the things that we discovered in the Enlightenment, and that we just need to get rid of all that religion nonsense and then peace and love and democracy.

His latest books on that, *The Better Angel of Our Nature* and *Enlightenment* now both kind of are stacked with all these statistics about all kinds of measures in which he believes the world is a better place than it has been. That's right. Again, it's not my field.

I'm not an expert in this, but some of the reviews that I've read have pointed out some of the things that he ignores and that there are major things going on. Actually, as one reviewer said, if this was going to be true anywhere, it should be true in the United States, which is the Enlightenment country of our excellence, but actually, if you step away from Harvard where he's teaching into places not too far from Boston, Massachusetts, there is real poverty. There is real racial tension.

There are real all sorts of things which are smoldering away and which this nice smooth, "Oh, we're getting it all right now, aren't we?" isn't really adequate. And I'm aware as well just on that. I had Steven Pinker in this very studio to debate these issues with an expense a little while ago.

But the thing that I felt was lacking in Enlightenment now, as much as there were all these measures, sort of hard statistics if you like death rates and mortality and so on, that you can look at, doesn't necessarily tell you about the quality of the life in as much as we see today in our incredibly materially rich world in the West, people nevertheless, the incidence of depression, mental health issues seems to be going up and up and up. And there's some ways in which the more technology we have, the less we seem to be able to actually get whole lives. I'm sure that's true.

And one does see that and the studies of young people who live on their screen and then can't relate to other people and that there's lots and lots written about that. But I want to say so many of the things, and this is where Tom Holland's work comes in and also Rodney Stark, the rise of Christianity, that actually if you look at the ancient classical

world into which Christianity was born, and if you look at the pagan world in general around the world, and if you look at some of the great Enlightenment moments, like the French Revolution and so on, they were not places out of which you would get the idea that we now embrace of human rights or of widespread public education or publicly available medicine, et cetera, the Christians were doing that stuff from the beginning. I remember somebody telling me it was time for the church to get out of the education business and let the state do it.

Actually, we've been in this education business for a long time, much longer than any state has been doing, and we've got form on this, we know what we're talking about. And so there are many, many ways in which, though Christianity has often been part of the problem, not part of the solution, because we've got things horribly wrong as well and we've distorted things. Nevertheless, the great movements of civilization have often been traceable to deeply Christian roots, which themselves have deeply Jewish roots.

And just talking to friends the other day about this in relation to music, the way in which the flourishing of modern classical music, even though some of that has gone in very different directions, actually goes back to the Western monastic tradition, and then out of the plain song of Psalm chanting, then polyphony emerging in the 15th and 16th centuries, and giving people these possibilities, which are like a new flowering of the gospel, of the many voices that actually make harmony together. And I'm fascinated by that and by art as well and the way that's worked. So it isn't so much that you can then trace a steady crescendo, Jesus, and then things get better and better and better, because often things do get horribly worse.

But Jesus, and then there is hope, and then there are new possibilities and new things happen. And you can't take it for granted, and you can't settle down and say, "Well, that's all right then, we're sailing smoothly to heaven or to heaven and earth combination." But nor can you say with Stephen Pinker, "Get rid of the religion and the secular world with triumph." And well, Chimes is nicely actually with a comment really as much as a question from Grant in San Diego, who says, "Do we Christians undermine one of the greatest evidences for the truth of the whole gospel, when we collude with the accusers to disparage Western civilization? Yes, it's flawed. No, it's not the city whose builder and maker is God.

Yes, it's culture is sometimes a mix of Christianity and other odd bits of Greek and Roman paganism, but it's far more Christian than not. Just look at the writings of historians you've just mentioned, Rodney Stark and Tom Holland, Christianity transformed Western civilization, and even as much of modern Europe declares itself post-Christian, it's still so deeply Christian in its worldview, laws and values. So by disparaging the West, do we not in a sense also undermine the work of the gospel in the West and its example? Why are we so hard on the West, holding it to standards that have never been met by any other civilization? Thanks for what you do, Tom.

Yes, I mean, I'm deeply ambivalent about this because all that I've said before, I will stand by that actually there are many, many things in Western civilization which are fruits of the gospel, for which we should be deeply grateful. The problem has come that particularly since the 18th century, there's been a deep ambiguity in the whole post-enlightenment world, because the Enlightenment has tried to get the fruits of that long, long civilization while cutting off the roots and saying we don't want the Jesus bit, we don't want the Jewish bit, we'll take on these projects ourselves, and actually the history of the 19th and 20th century is of that going horribly wrong, whether it's in the trenches of the First World War or in Auschwitz or in 9/11 or whatever, that actually, I mean, somebody wrote a book 20 years ago, "Why the Rest Tates the West?" There is an arrogance about Western civilization which is a classic enlightenment, the word "enlightenment" says it all. We are the Enlightenment ones, so that when you see on the news 20 people being killed in some suburb in Baghdad, the way that that's presented as well is 20 more people... That's the barbaric part of the world.

It's that stuff over there, whereas if it was 20 people being killed on the streets of London, "Oh my goodness, this is people like us!" but actually they're all people like us. And so that Western arrogance has got to be named and shamed, not in order to say that the West, you know, it's avoided over simplifications, is automatically bad, but we have to be able to discern, as we do with ourselves, when we look in the mirror, when we go to a spiritual director, when we say our prayers, when we receive the Eucharist, you know, "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner." This doesn't mean that everything about my past life is as bad as it could possibly be. It just means, yeah, there's still stuff to sort out here.

Absolutely. Maybe the last one here from Raheel in Arizona. And this could be a brief response because Raheel's really just looking for some resources and commentary.

"Empty writers written in surprise by hope. As far as I can see, the major task that faces us in our generation, corresponding to the issue of slavery two centuries ago, is that of the massive economic imbalance of the world, whose major symptom is the ridiculous and unpayable third-world debt." And he mentioned in an interview with the National Catholic Reporter that to him, the big moral issue would be the money sliding into the pockets of the Western banking system at the cost of keeping most of the world in unpayable debt. I love this one to learn more.

Does Tom have any resources? He would point us to re-listen, "Gley, learn, and be better informed in this area." Yes, I've been hugely helped by working with the organization called Christian Aid, which is a Christian charity, obviously. And particularly when I was Bishop of Durham, I worked quite closely with them and spoke in the House of Lords about related issues and so on. And they would be my first port of call because they're working at the coal face around the world and they're in touch with all the other related movements.

So I would simply go onto their websites and take it from there. And for me, one of the high points, and this is 20 years ago now, was the Jubilee 2000 movement, which did succeed in getting some of those huge unpayable debts remitted. I do want to say, because people have quizzed me about this, am I therefore ranking these different problems, the global debt is the most important thing, and that other moral issues are less important? No.

Morality is indivisible. God's world is God's world. Human life is human life.

But part of the problem about unpayable third-world debt is not only its injustice and the extraordinary abuse of the system by, say, bankers and systems that just lend money at high rates of interest and insist on its being paid, even though the people they lent it to a long debt and gone. And then, of course, in 2008, when the bankers ran out of cash, then the very rich did for the very rich what they'd refused to do for the very poor. That's the crucial thing.

But then in those countries where there is this unpayable debt, education suffers, medicine suffers, children suffer, particularly, the elderly suffer, because the country is having to try to pay compound interest debt in a way that is totally ridiculous. It would never happen to you or me because we could go bankrupt, and then you draw a line and start again. Countries can't go bankrupt, and therefore, if we're caring about the health and well-being of particularly the really vulnerable, then this issue actually touches all of that, and it still does.

And I would say also Christian Aid, who I'm a big fan of as well, have got some interesting resources as well on what they're calling climate poverty as well in relation to what we've been speaking about the way that climate change adversely affects most, well strongly those debt. Precisely because in countries like Bangladesh or some of the Pacific Islands, which, that they're highest are only a few feet above sea level. If the sea level's rise, there's a lot of people whose homes are simply going.

Well look, I hope that's given some idea of how we approach these issues at a global level and how we can do so, I suppose in confidence as well as with concern for the world that we live in. But Tom, thank you very much for lending your wisdom again. And thank you for all the questions that have come in, and we'll see you again next time.

Thank you very much.

[Music] Well thank you very much for being with us on today's show. Next time we're talking about animals, do they go to heaven? Tom is answering questions on the new creation and the animal kingdom.

That's the next time we bring you the Ask and T-Rite Anything podcast, and we'll see you next time.

(gentle music) [Silence]