

# OpenTheo

## #132 Is the Bible anti-women? Does God hear the prayers of agnostics?

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### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom offers advice to a listener who is moving away from Christianity because she believes the Bible seems to treat women as second class citizens. Another is an agnostic who has been praying for the war in Ukraine. Will God hear my prayers if I'm not even sure I believe?

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## Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast. Welcome back to the show, I'm Justin Briley, director of Premier Unbelievable, the show brought to you in partnership with SBCK and NTYRight online, and we've put links to special deals for both our partners with today's show. Well today we're continuing with pastoral questions from people struggling with faith.

Tom offers advice to a listener who's moving away from Christianity because she believes the Bible seems to treat women as second-class citizens, and another is an agnostic who's been praying for the war in Ukraine, and they ask, "Will God hear my prayers if I'm not even sure I believe?" Well just before we leap in, a quick mention for

our upcoming live webinar. Since this month, on Tuesday, the 13th of September, I'll be hosting an online panel discussion, *Falling From Grace*, addressing power, leadership and abuse in the church. It features Amy O'Youing, president of the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics, and former vice president of RZIM.

Rachel Den Hollander, the attorney in *Advocate for Abuse Survivors*, Mike Cossber, presenter and producer of the *Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* podcast, and Diane Langberg, psychologist and trauma specialist. So in light of a series of leadership scandals that have rocked the evangelical church in recent years, we're going to be asking, "What does this reckoning mean for the mega-church ministry model? How do we ensure the voices of survivors are heard, and what must the church do to repent and be transformed?" It's free to attend this webinar from anywhere in the world, and you can ask your questions too of this very significant panel. Again, it's taking place Tuesday the 13th of September at 8pm UK, that's 3pm Eastern, or 12 noon Pacific.

So do register your place now to be part of it at [unbelievable.live](http://unbelievable.live). And the link is with today's show. Do join us to be part of that conversation. Right now, let's leap into another conversation and your questions.

Well, we're continuing to look at some of the questions that have come in from folk who are really struggling with their faith. And again, as ever, we'll say, do seek out the counsel of spiritual advisors, wise people who can help you at a pastoral level deal with these issues. But today, Tom, we'll look at some sort of specific issues that people are finding a barrier to their faith.

And specifically Ruth in California has an issue with what she sees as the misogyny that seems to be present in some aspects of Scripture, asking, "Is the Bible anti-women effectively?" So this is the way Ruth puts her question, "Why is the Bible so negative about women?" Malness is never disparaging the Bible as far as I'm aware. But femaleness seems to be derided from beginning to end, from Genesis, where woman is created as an afterthought, to revelation where the 144,000 redeemed ones are praised as not being polluted by women. I just recently noticed that last one.

And of course, all the insults in between women are especially prone to be deceived and to transgress their definitely second place in the created order and don't reflect God's image and glory the way that men do, etc. Now, I don't believe that these incursions of women's inferiority are true, of course, and I'm finding that the Bible is now full of landmines for me. For example, these days, if I want to read the part in Revelation about God wiping every tear away, I also think of how it's all for thought of me and all other women as "pollution." There are a lot of reasons that I seem to be moving out of Christianity after decades of varying levels of involvement, but this is one of the main ones.

Is there any way for me to look at the Bible's view of women other than it reflecting

simple misogyny? Oh, gosh, Tom, yes, we could spend many podcasts probably talking about various of the issues Ruth raises here. And we're distinctly aware that we are two men talking about this and there are probably many great female teachers and Bible teachers who would equally have a great word to say to Ruth on these issues. But where would you begin on this? Yeah, these are huge issues and our generation has quite rightly raised them.

And I want to say very emphatically that you can read the Bible that way if you like, and sadly many have done. But actually when I read the Bible, I see Genesis 1, where male and female together are reflecting God's image. I see all sorts of characters from Sarah Abraham's wife through Ruth, through Deborah in the book of Judges, through Hannah Samuel's mother, who are highlighted as women of faith and prayer and hope, and very much as role models actually, while again and again, I see all sorts of toxic masculinity, both in the patriarchal period where the men and their squabbling and fighting are the problem, the deeply dysfunctional family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, full of men who are behaving badly and on and on and on so that again and again, the critique of human sin throughout scripture highlights the arrogance and folly of emperors who are almost always male, of warlords who are fighting and being violent and killing millions of people.

So it isn't that the men are getting a free ride and the women are being dumped on, again and again, the men are just as bad and much worse actually in scripture, so that I think if you've had a different impression, then please read quickly through and make a note of all the places where the men, whether it's wicked kings of Israel, whether it's false prophets, whether it's corrupt priests, these are men who are making these mistakes and often they drag the women down with them, alas and so on. And then in the New Testament, Jesus' approach to women, Jesus' attitude to women is quite extraordinary and his welcome of women and his offer of forgiveness and healing to women and then his commissioning of women to be witnesses of the resurrection, starting with Mary Magdalene. These are absolutely central and as with everything in Christian theology, we have to bring it back to the four gospels, back to the picture of Jesus and say that's the center, now what's going on elsewhere.

There isn't time to comment on 1 Corinthians 11 verses 2 and following which was cited that there are all sorts of interpretations of that including one which says that here as elsewhere in 1 Corinthians Paul may be quoting from something which the Corinthians had said in order to correct it. He clearly does that in chapter 6 and 8 and maybe he's doing it in chapter 11 as well. The bit in Revelation, I'm not able to comment on that right now.

Though I do notice that throughout the Bible, there are what we today might call health and safety regulations in terms of human health, human behavior and the problem that different people have, both men and women of things that happen to or in or through their bodies which are themselves polluting in the sense that you have to be careful how

you handle these in an ancient society in terms of the health and cleanliness of the whole. That's not an excuse for problematic passages but it's something we have to bear in mind because we have plenty of health and safety regulations ourselves which we don't see as a problem even though another culture might. I think I want to say, yes, Christians not least in the Western world have abused scripture in order to abuse women and it's time we stop doing that.

It's time we read the whole Bible focusing on Jesus and on his acceptance of and commissioning of women and celebrated the god-giveness of and in the best sense the complementarity of men and women without assuming that that complementarity means that they have radically different roles and never the train shall meet. That's where I would start. If we could sit down together and look at these passages and get the commentaries out, there would be a lot more that we could say as well.

Just taking that very specific one and you can't address every single question here that obviously Ruth raises but this reference in revelation to the 144,000 and not being praised and not being polluted by women. Any thoughts on that, Thomas, is obviously a very specific thing that Ruth finds troubling among other things. Some people have said I'm not an expert on this.

I've tended as people who know my work will know to concentrate on the Gospels and Paul. I've written about the rest but only in bits and pieces here and there. Some people see that as being rather like an elite core of warriors in the ancient world for whom returning back home and engaging in normal domestic life was a distraction, a kind of emotional and spiritual distraction from the task that they had in hand.

It may be something like that. That's only one interpretation among many and I wouldn't say that it's necessarily the right one. I would want to pull out some commentaries on revelation and see what other people have done with that but I would be wary of giving a definitive answer myself.

I would notice as well of course that the great scene at the end of the book of Revelation is of the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven as a bride adorned for her husband and the marriage of Christ and the church using that glorious image of husband and wife, that is a validation, a celebration of womanhood and if that is true for Christ and the church, then the idea that oh well women are always polluting. Surely that has to be transcended by the larger reality of the goodness of God's created order, male and female together. I could recommend a number of female scholars, one sort or another who have written, hopefully I think, on these issues.

I won't name the specific books but you might look up people like for instance Ruth, Amy or Ewing, Beth Alice and Baja, a new book, The Making of Biblical Woman had maybe helpful. Paul of Gooda has written on this and many others who may find helpful in, who are looking at the same questions as you but potentially coming to different conclusions

when they look at the big scope of Scriptures. Thank you very much for the question.

Let's go to another one here. This is Timia in Finland and this is a rather interesting one which is does God answer prayers from non-believers? That is essentially where Timia finds himself, a bit of background info. I'm an agnostic, though sympathetic towards Christianity.

And I've been praying about the war in Ukraine almost every day since the conflict started. Because there isn't anything else for me to do, I feel frustrated and powerless. So I would ask God to end it, to save as many lives as possible, to reveal the truth behind the conflicting news and allegations made by both sides and to bring everyone responsible for this and any war criminals to justice.

But is all this in vain? Would God answer my prayers or even care for them? If I'm not even sure he hears them, especially when believing Christians have been praying that this conflict could be avoided and yet it still happens. So this is a rather interesting position that Timia finds himself in. I can only assume that they would like God to be there and listening.

But it doesn't remain unsure. But sort of says, well, I might as well pray. I might just ask and so on.

But is it in vain and why, if so many people have been praying, have this one nonetheless carried on and so on? So what would you say to this person? I found this a wonderfully humble question. It was kind of genuine agnosticism. It wasn't agnosticism, which is really atheism.

It was, I don't know, but maybe. And it seems to me just as when somebody came to Jesus and said, Lord, I believe help thou my unbelief, quoting the old King James Version, which is in my head from childhood. I think many of us find ourselves in that position many times.

And in that case, that was a father with a son who was desperately sick. And Jesus saying, well, if you believe, and he said, well, please help my unbelief. That's a prayer which God will hear and answer.

Of course, the question then is when there are millions of Christians around the world praying for peace, praying for justice, praying for mercy on God's world. That has been so in every war that has taken place in the last 2000 years. Christians have said, Lord, how long, Lord, please rebuke the violent and insolent and wicked.

Please bring peace out of strife and bring justice out of folly, et cetera, et cetera. All those prayers are hugely important. And I think here again, as in some other answers that I've been giving, I want to say we need a fully trinitarian view of what's going on.

According to the New Testament, Jesus now is at the father's right hand interceding for us, Paul says that in Romans 8, the Hebrew says it, and it all comes out of the idea of Jesus now being as it were our man in heaven. He is for us with God. And he is summing up the praises and prayers of creation and especially of his own people before God.

And then particularly, and I think back to my beloved Romans 8, the Holy Spirit within us is groaning with inarticulate that is not coming into speech, groans within the agony of the church within the agony of the world. This is part of our vocation as Christians. And it seems to me if agnostics are joining in, then God is celebrating that as well.

To be people who stand in prayer at the place where the world is in pain. I've said that again and again and I see it and feel it and kind of know it more deeply with every passing year that there are many ways in which we do not know what's going on. And we have this sense of groaning in a prayer that can hardly even come into speech because God doesn't seem to be answering it.

But the answer which Paul gives is that when we are doing that, God's own spirit is active within us and calling to the Father from within the pain of the world. And the answer then is not we want God to solve this in five minutes or we're going to quit. But rather we are called to be people in whom the spirit can utter the groaning of creation in order that the Father may hear it and that the world may be healed.

And as that happens, we are being, Paul says, conformed to the image of the Son. We are sharing the suffering of Jesus when he cried out, my God, my God, why did you abandon me? Again and again in prayer faced with the pain and the sin of the world. We find ourselves in that position.

Lord, what's going on? Why don't you do something? What's happened? And when we find ourselves there, we are in Gethsemane with Jesus. And we dare to say as Paul does, we are crucified with the Messiah. Nevertheless then there is a life which comes through.

So that this prayer of unknowing seems to me actually right on the map for the New Testament theology of Trinitarian prayer. And I would encourage my Finnish brother to persevere with the same humble faith which is what he's got as he is already showing. And we join him in that prayer that God will rescue the situation in Eastern Europe from the terror which is going on right now.

I mean it's interesting to me as a question because I think it does reflect a curious thing that often comes up in Paul's for instance. The number of people who say they pray often outweighs the number of people who say they actually believe in God. It's almost as if prayer sort of flows out of us in a way that even people who don't necessarily have any specific belief in God still feel the urge somehow to pray to direct their thoughts, their anxieties, even their thankfulness sometimes to something that they don't really have a name for it in that way.

Absolutely. Absolutely. And I've met this with people who will quite casually say and then laugh at themselves for saying it.

You know thank you Lord for a wonderful day. And hey am I supposed to say that I'm an atheist you know. And so people do and I think there's a little bit of natural theology there that humans, many many humans kind of know in their bones that they are supposed to be relating to someone other than themselves.

And then the question is who is this someone? And that's where Christianity says well if you look at Jesus you are on the way to finding out. Yeah I think it might have been Chesterton or someone who said the hardest thing about being an atheist is not having anyone to say thank you to that there's a sense in which it's sort of there isn't it. And we want to say thank you to something or someone don't we.

That's right that does sound like Chester's. Yeah anyway. Thank you very much Tom and thank you to Mia for the very honest question as Tom's said I thought it was it was lovely to hear just the sincerity behind that question as you brought it.

So wherever you find yourself on the journey we hope that these podcasts are helpful and that these questions and answers that we try to bring help you in your own in your own walk. But for now thank you very much Tom for giving some time to these and we look forward to catching up again at the same time next week. Thank you.

Thank you for being with us on this edition of the show next time we're asking is faith anti-intellectual. We'll have more of your questions and just a reminder that our special webinar panel on church leadership scandals abuse and survivors is this month Tuesday the 13th of September. Do book your place for it at unbelievable dot live.

God bless and see you next time.

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