

# OpenTheo

## #63 Facebook Qs Pt. 2: Bereavement, other faiths & atonement

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### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom answers more questions on atonement, other religions and caring for those who have lost loved ones, sent in by members of the NT Wright discussion group.

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## Transcript

Ask NT Wright Anything podcast Hello and welcome to another edition of the show with me, Justin Briley. I'm Premier's Theology & Apologetics Editor and I have the distinct privilege of sitting down on a regular basis with Tom Wright to ask him your questions and today we're going to be looking at more questions that came in from the NT Wright discussion group on Facebook. So thanks again to Luther Cabin who moderates that group and has harvested these questions.

I'm a member of the group and you're very welcome to join it too if you would like to, if you're on Facebook and you want a place where people like discussing the thought and theology of NT Wright. If you're listening to this podcast, it's probably because you enjoy listening to Tom himself talking about that and just a thank you to Medina Wright Check in Wisconsin who said, "I'd love to thank you for all that you share, all the books you write Tom. As a mum of four little children under the age of six, I'm a little busy but I love listening to your podcast over and over again all day while I take care of my kids and do running." I have a question though, would you be interested in having your podcast translated into Russian? I'm a linguist originally from St Petersburg, Russia.

Medina, thank you very much. I will try and get back to you on that amazing suggestion. Who knows? Maybe possible.

Great to hear from you. Thank you for leaving some feedback to the show. You can do that yourself if you're listening on podcasts today.

Why not rate and review the show wherever you're listening from helps other people to discover the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast and of course the show is brought to you as ever by Premier, SBCK and NT Wright online. Now as I revealed last week, we've got some really exciting stuff coming up very soon. Thursday the 13th of May, I'm going to be hosting a livestream conversation between Tom and Douglas Murray.

Douglas Murray is a journalist and author, associate editor of the Spectator magazine and leading political commentator. The author of books including *The Madness of Crowds*, *Gender, Race and Identity*. He's described himself as a Christian atheist.

This will be a fascinating conversation because we're going to be talking about identity, myth and miracles. Can we find a story to live by in a post-Christian world? We'll be examining why Douglas in a sense misses Christianity. He was a Christian at one time.

Will this conversation with Tom make any difference to that? You'll have to be there to find out. That's Thursday the 13th of May for that live streamed conversation. If you want to make sure that you're in the right place at the right time, looking at the right thing on YouTube or Facebook, do go to the big conversation dot show to click on the third episode of our big conversation series which is what that will be that live streamed episode of the show.

And of course, if you can make it, we would love to see you two days later at Unbelievable the Conference Saturday the 15th of May. You can book your place at unbelievable dot live. Tom Wright is going to be there very much bringing us this theme of how to tell the greatest story ever told alongside some brilliant other contributors like Tom Holland, Claire Williams, Sean and Josh McDowell.

I'll be hosting it along with Ruth Jackson. It's all online so you can visit, you can be part of it from wherever you are in the world. And we've even got to pay what you want option.

Okay, so finance shouldn't be any barrier to be able to attend. This isn't just another Zoom conference though. We've got loads of time for really engaging Q&A throughout the day and a special edition, a live edition of the Ask and T Write Anything show.

So you'll hear that in due course on the podcast, but you can be part of it live if you're there on the day. Unbelievable dot live for Unbelievable the conference 2021 on Saturday the 15th of May. For now, let's get into your questions.

Welcome back to today's edition of the podcast and excited to be bringing you more

questions from the anti-write discussion group on Facebook. Thanks again to Luther Kabin who's the moderator for harvesting these questions for us. I'm sorry we could only take a small number actually of the questions that were submitted.

But we'll be back to questions that have come in as normal from those who submit it via those who are registered with the website from next week. So ask ntwrite.com if you would like to submit your question in the usual fashion and have a chance of it being asked to Tom in a future podcast. Let's go straight in here, Tom.

To Rodney Stewart Wilcox who asks, do you find in Colossians 1:11 a good summary of how you understand the atonement? Now I think they must have left off some extra verses here because I think for this question to make sense it must be Colossians 1:11 to 14. And I'm very happy to read it from my Bible in front of me, Tom, but you might like to read it from what you've got in front of you. Sure.

You read it from yours. We'll see which first of the NRSV. That's what I tend to go with most of the time.

So here we go. May you be strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience while joyfully giving thanks to the Father who is enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. His rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved son in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

So yes, so a good summary of how you understand the atonement, Tom. In some ways, yes, I'm always wary of this because whenever the New Testament talks about what Jesus achieved on the cross, I say that rather than the word atonement for reasons that have become clear, it never does it the same way twice. So that each time Paul refers to it, he gives it a different nuance according to the argument which he is mounting at the time.

He never stands back and says, okay, this is the big abstract truth of which everything else is just playing out. The only time he does that sort of thing is when he says in 1 Corinthians 15, the Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures. Well, okay, thanks Paul, we take that now.

What does that actually mean? And here's one of the spellings out. It's not the only one. And I would want to say rather carefully, balance this out with Romans 3, with Romans 8, with Galatians 3 and 4, et cetera, et cetera.

However, having said that, there are several things which are packed into Colossians 1, 1 to 40, and well, actually, particularly 12, 13 and 14, which are absolutely central to the New Testament doctrine of what happened. And one is, and you wouldn't necessarily pick this up until you're alerted to it. This is Exodus language, it's Passover language,

talking about being rescued from one kingdom and translated into another sounds like Israel being rescued from Egypt and taken off to their inheritance, to their promised land.

And that's confirmed by the fact that in verse 14, he talks about that in whom we have the redemption, the Greek word is *apolutrosis*, usually in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, where we have *apolutrosis* language, that is regularly a reference to God redeeming Israel from the slave market of Egypt. So it starts off as the idea of somebody buying back a slave and giving them their freedom, but that is made much more specific and historical in Scripture because Israel was a slave in Egypt. So this is very much Exodus language.

Jesus chose Passover to do what had to be done, to go to Jerusalem and make the final confrontation, knowing where it would lead. That wasn't accidental. Jesus did not choose, say, the day of atonement.

So what's this bit about then the forgiveness of sins in verse 14? Redemption. Well, Israel wasn't being forgiven sins when Israel was redeemed from Egypt because they hadn't gone to Egypt as a result of sin. They'd gone there because there was a famine and Joseph happily was sent on ahead and that all worked out.

However, in the great exile, the exile in Babylon, the prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc, etc, are clear that they've been exiled because of their sin, because of their idolatry, so that when God did the new Exodus, this would not only be a Passover, it would also be the forgiveness of their sins. You see that in that lovely passage in Isaiah 40, "Comfort, comfort my people, your God, keep saying, because you've received from the Lord's hand double for your sins. It's time for release." And so in a sense, all of that is resonating in the background here.

So you've got then the big picture of the cosmic victory of God over the powers of darkness and the cosmic rescue of God's people. And then the personal heart of that, which is that we receive forgiveness of sins. So many Christians have tried to do the one without the other.

If it's forgiveness, it can't be cosmic or vice versa. No, in the Bible, it's always both, as John makes clear, as Paul makes clear. So yeah, this is a pretty good shot, actually.

But of course, as I say, it needs to be drawn out and nuanced with other passages as well. So thanks to Rodness, Stuart Wilcox, that's a great question. It is a great question.

And in a sense, but simply reinforces the fact that, as you've said very often, that the atonement is such a multifaceted thing, it would be hard to simply arrive at one passage and say this sort of sums it all up. But thank you so much. That was helpful.

Now, obviously, the next question that we've got, Keelson, the fact that there are many

people, many people following other religious paths that do not accept this way of understanding our relationship with God and being reconciled. Jake Jesse is a member of the group who asks for someone not born and raised in a Christian environment, for example, Jews, Muslims, even non-abrahamic faith, etc. Will God reject them as non-image bearers in Christ's way, truth and life? So are we evangelists to essentially say, how dare you continue the religion you were born and raised in? Why don't you convert to the religion that I was born and raised in? And I suspect for Jake, there's a sense that that just feels a little bit patronizing, arrogant.

And I believe knowing that another one or two of the questions that Jake asked, which we haven't had time to include here, I believe his church is currently doing a sort of evangelistic campaign, which is very much about you need to make a decision before you die in order to be saved. And I think that's sort of partly where this whole question is coming from. But yeah, to the question itself, where do you go with that? Is it sort of essentially saying God will reject them as non-image bearers if they simply are not following our path? Yeah, it's so difficult, isn't it? Because we're going back to the New Testament and we're going back to Jesus.

Jesus was a first-century Palestinian Jew, a Judean lived in Galilee and to Enfro to Jerusalem. All his first followers were Jewish. The church was a Jewish institution.

Paul, even at the very moment when he's going out to the Gentiles and telling them that the world has a new Lord and it's Jesus. The whole point of what he's saying is that Jesus is Israel's Messiah, so that when Paul faces the question, what about Jews who don't believe in Jesus, it's like the younger brother and the older brother in the parable. The younger brother finds himself now as the father's son after all and the older brother is cross, but the father still wants to bring the older brother back in.

That's the picture that I think Paul has in mind in Romans 9 to 11. So Jews are a special case. Come back to Muslims and others in just a minute.

But the way that Jake sums it up, I know only too clearly where he's coming from and our problem is with this idea of religion and the different religions. Christianity is not ultimately a religion either in the ancient sense or in the modern sense. Christianity is about Jesus and the question is not, "Oh, here's a religion, here's a system, here's a way of being religious, here's a way of saying your prayers, here's a way of hoping for something here after." Christianity is all simply about Jesus and the question is, was Jesus of Nazareth, Israel's Messiah, the embodiment of the Creator God, the Lord of the world or wasn't He? Because if He wasn't, if He is simply one great teacher among many, then well, good luck to you, whatever way you follow.

But if He really was that, then we are not at liberty to say, "Oh, well, this is just our religion, but good luck to you if you're doing something else." As any 1st century Jew would tell you, if somebody comes along and says, "So and so is the Messiah," then

either this means we've all got to sign up here or it means they are dangerously wrong at this point. You can't collapse back into a sort of 18th century tolerance and say, "Oh, well, if you think Jesus is a Messiah, that's very nice for you." But of course, other people will have other opinions. No, because the whole point is about God doing something in the middle of history.

And either that is true or it's a major deception. We in the modern West have flattened it out into different forms of what we have called religion, which is an 18th century notion, the way we hear the word religion. So we need to unpick the question in order to be able to address it properly.

Then I want to say, "Appropo," including many, many people who think of themselves as practicing Christians. Actually, there are many who think of themselves as practicing Christians and may go to church on Sunday and whatever, but who haven't even begun to understand what it means that Jesus was the embodiment of Israel's God and he died and rose to launch God's new creation. And I would say, "Watch out.

You may be following a false version of something even if it's got the name Jesus attached to it." Equally, there may be many in Islam and I have met such people who actually have a sense that there is something different. There's something which is beckoning them and some of them realize that this is the one they call "isse" and even sometimes while staying within a Muslim family, though that's very difficult. They may reach out in faith to "isse" to Jesus and Jesus will welcome them.

And so it's not up to us to say, "Oh, you're a Muslim, so you don't count or whatever." We have to be very careful of that. And of course, yes, there is always the danger of arrogance. I was born and raised in a Christian home and I'm hugely grateful for that.

But many others born in homes exactly like mine have thrown it all over and gone different ways. For whatever reason, I have stuck with this and developed and gone on. So we do have to be aware of arrogance partly because the Jesus who we worship, who we follow is the one who's said to people, "There are many who come from east and west and sit down at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of God, while the children of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness because they've presumed." So though he was there talking about Jews and Gentiles, it's quite possible that that could apply further on to people in our own day as well who imagine they're all right while in fact God is doing new things out there as it were.

I mean, I have to say at a personal level, your work, Tom, has helped me enormously. With that cognitive distance that can occur when you have lived a life essentially seeing the Christian gospel as you need to make this particular decision in order to ensure you go to that place instead of that place. And that basically is what it all boils down to because at that point, you're constantly thinking, "Yes, yes." You know, everyone around me is essentially damned at this point.

Now, I've had incredibly helpful to say, to replace that sort of way of thinking of it with God has launched something in Jesus Christ, this new creation, this kingdom, and we are joining in with that. And it sort of suddenly takes the weight off your shoulders of, "I suddenly have to do this job of ensuring as many people get quote unquote saved and realize that there's something much bigger than me going on. There's this grand narrative, this story that I'm part of." And for me, that helps enormously with the kind of thing I just check Jake is feeling, which is this sort of awful sense of, "Gosh, it all rests on me and everyone else is wrong and how are we going to work this out?" I don't know if that makes sense to you, Tom.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

It makes a lot of sense. And I know exactly that world that you're describing and that he apparently was describing. And it's very difficult because once one recognizes that this, you know, decide tonight, say this prayer, then you're going to have an okay job done, pass on to the next person sort of thing.

That's a caricature, but that is often how it comes across. At the same time, when we react against that, that can be an excuse for sitting back and saying, "Oh, well, God will do whatever God's going to do, so I'm not going to go through the embarrassing business of telling this friend down the road that actually they need to accept Jesus into their life," because there are times when that's precisely what I need to say to the friend down the road. And that's, we have to avoid the oversimplifications while being ready for the challenge.

And that's why I find myself that praying for friends, praying for neighbors, for people that I know only vaguely. In that context, when then an opportunity occurs suddenly, and they ask a question, then, "Oh, well, I have actually been praying for this person, so I'm going to take my courage in both hands and say this," but simply to say, "This is what we have to sort of yell at the world, say this prayer or you're going to hell," then that is pretty much a caricature. It doesn't look to me as though people are doing that too much in the first century.

Trent Faircloth has a question. It's more of a pastoral one. Dr. Wright, "I am a chaplain in the fire service, and I encounter death often.

What is your pastoral advice in comforting and praying with those who have lost loved ones?" Many thanks. Now, I'm sure there's much you could say here, Tom, but you perhaps just a few thoughts at least. The first thing to say is this has not been my ministry.

I have ministered, obviously, to people who have lost loved ones, but much of my ministry was with students where comparatively few people are dying in student communities, some do, or with other situations where I haven't had to take a lot of

funerals. The average clergy person of five years standing has taken more funerals than I who have been ordained for 45 years. I'm not hugely experienced.

However, it does seem to me there are one or two constants, and one is simply to stand with people in their grief. Paul says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep." Sometimes that wordless presence is a very powerful prayer, but then within that grieving with those who grieve, there are the two prayers, one, entrusting the loved one to God's safekeeping without presupposing that we know the state of their heart or mind or whatever, but just, Lord, this is somebody we have loved and lost, and you love them as well, and we want to entrust this person to you. A good funeral service does precisely that, of course, but then praying for comfort for the person we're with and for family, praying that God will be with them and will give them strength day by day and hour by hour to meet the wave upon wave of sorrow that is going to come upon them.

I mean, I would say from a human psychological point of view, many people don't realize that the human frame is hardwired to do grief. It's like when you've eaten something that disagrees with you and your body is hardwired to get rid of it, either by vomiting or whatever. That's very unpleasant, but the body can do that.

In the same way, the emotions do know how to do grief, and we have to let that process happen and not try and stop it or say, "Oh, no, no, you mustn't do that," because when Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4, "I don't want you to grieve like those who have no hope," he doesn't mean, "I don't want you to grieve." He means, "I don't want you to do hopeless grieving. I want you to do hopeful grieving." And then in that context, we can pray with them for the hope which can hang on in and through the grieving process. That's what I would say.

Thank you so much. I hope that gives some help, Trent, and God bless you in that very important role that you have there. It's important to have chaplains in those places where people are facing life and death situations almost on a daily basis.

Final question from another member of the anti-right discussion group on Facebook. This has been a special couple of podcasts we've been doing specifically tackling some of their questions. By the way, if you want to go and find it, if you are on Facebook and you'd like to sign up and be part of that group, they're more than happy to welcome you there, just you're just looking for the anti-right discussion group on Facebook.

I'm sure you'll find it soon if you type that in. Jordan Wright asks, "When is Tom's next Christian origins and the questions of God coming out?" Now, how many of these have you done, Tom? Is it four in the series thus far? Yes. Or, yeah, four.

I've done a new Testament to people of God, Jesus is the victory of God, the resurrection and the Son of God and Paul and the faithfulness of God. I am tempted to answer this question by saying soon, remembering the lovely line in one of the C.S. Lewis children's



stories, where Aslan says soon and one of the girls, I think, says, "What does that mean, Aslan?" And Aslan says, "I call all times soon," which is... So, yeah, soon. Okay.

God willing, it will happen, but it won't be tomorrow. I've got one or two other projects which are urgently required before I can turn my attention to that book. But if people out there want to be praying for those next projects, please do, because I need that.

The older I get, the easier it would be to say, "Oh, well, it's time to return now. Never mind. I won't do the rest of this." But I sort of do want to do at least the next volume, possibly the sixth one as well, we shall see.

So, what would the focus be of the next volume as and when it does arrive? Oh, the next one is supposed to be on the gospels. It would be the gospels and the story of God. In other words, granted what I've said about early Christianity and particularly granted what I've said about Jesus himself, why would people in the 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, whenever, want to tell his story this way? There might have been many other ways to tell the Jesus story.

Why did they choose to do it this way and what particular things are they highlighting in the way they tell the story? Because that then helps us in how we tell the Jesus story, reflecting there are different ways of doing it, although they have a commonality and we have to learn what the inside of that looks like. Thank you so much, Tom, for being with us on today's edition of the show. And thank you for all the questions that have come in from the NT Wright discussion group on Facebook.

And we'll be back to more of the questions that have come in the usual way on next week's edition of the show. But for now, thanks for being with us and see you next time, Tom. Thank you very much.

Thank you for listening and I hope you enjoyed today's edition of the podcast. Just a reminder, our show partner NT Wright online are offering a free ebook from Tom on the book of Acts to podcast listeners. Links are in the show notes.

And if you'd like to support the show, then we also have an ebook specifically made from answers Tom has given on the show. It's called 12 answers to questions about the Bible life and faith. And if you go to ask NT Wright dot com and click on give, then you can help to support the show that way.

If you'd like more from the show, that's also the place to go in terms of subscribing and getting some of the additional content that's available when you do that. You'll be part of our regular newsletter, bringing you stuff from Tom. And we'd love to see you at unbelievable conference.

Saturday the 15th of May, unbelievable dot live is the place to register and get yourself a ticket. You can attend from anywhere in the world. And don't forget the curtain razor as

well.

Thursday the 13th of May, do check out that with Douglas Murray, the live stream conversation that I'll be hosting between him and Tom Wright. More details at the big conversation dot show. All of the links from today's episode.

Thanks for being with us.

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