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#124 - Medieval questions and the subject of Galatians

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Medieval Questions and the subject of Galatians. A bonus edition of the podcast featuring Tom teaching on his new video course on Galatians.

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Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast Hello, welcome back. This is Justin Briley and the show is brought to you in partnership with NT Wright Online, SBCK, and Premier Unbelievable where I'm head of theology and apologetics. Well, today we've the first of two bonus episodes for you.

We're bringing you some of the teaching of Tom Wright on a recently released video study course on Galatians. You may remember that Tom published a significant new commentary on Galatians last year while this is the video course where you get to enjoy his insights and learn yourself. The title of this talk from it that we're featuring today is Medieval questions and the subject of Galatians.

It's the introduction to the course. Our friends at NT Wright Online are offering an exclusive podcast listener discount for the Galatians course \$10 off the usual price. If you want to get hold of that, go to [NT Wright Online.org/AskNT Wright](https://www.ntwrightonline.org/askntwright).

It's a bit hard to remember, isn't it? Don't worry, there's a link with today's show. Just click through to that and you will get the discount on this new Galatians course. Do check that out.

The link is with today's show. For more from the show, of course, you can also check out our own website that features Tom and all the other great resources we now offer you to help you understand, defend and share your faith with confidence. That's at PremierUnbelievable.com. If you're registered there for our newsletter as well as lots of bonus content, we'll send you the link to ask a question for this show as well and we'll be back to your questions on the show soon.

But for now, here's Tom with his introduction to Galatians. Welcome to this new course on Galatians. To begin with, I want to open things up in a big picture fashion before we plunge into the detail of the text.

I hope you've got a good translation of Galatians with you and, if you're up for that, the Greek text as well. I remember Professor Robin Scroggs, formerly of Union Seminary in New York, once being asked by a student, "Professor, should we bring a Bible to this class?" And Robin Scroggs replied, "I think you'll find it will shed a flood of light on the commentaries. It's always worth having the text there, as well as my or anyone else's commentary, though this course is based on my new commentary, Galatians published by Erdman's quite recently at the time when I'm recording this." Behind Robin Scroggs' cute remark, there is a serious point.

The exposition of Scripture is aimed at giving you the text back, so that you can now understand it more deeply, not take away the text and give you something else instead. Why do we need to do this again and again? Well, so often the Bible has been read in the light of the questions the church was asking at the time. Now, that's inevitable, up to a point.

We all do it. Rather than the questions that the authors of Scripture themselves were actually addressing. Well, some to and fro is inevitable between their questions and ours, but it needs to be a to and fro, not just a projection of our questions, onto a text that might be talking actually about something else.

You know how it is if you pick up the phone and you assume that this is a friend who was going to call you and you start talking about whatever it was you were going to discuss, and gradually you realize, "No, either it isn't that friend at all," or they're talking about something quite different and you have to adjust your expectations quickly. You know the story about the Sunday school teacher asking the class to name a small furry creature with a tail that climbs in trees, and one pupil saying, "I know the answer must be Jesus, but it sounds like a squirrel." A much sadder example of the same thing happened in 1997 after the funeral of Princess Diana. The churches the next day were full of people who wanted to grieve and were hoping for comfort, but in one church I

know the priest on duty decided that quite enough had been said about Diana all week, and he chose instead to preach on Mary the Mother of Jesus, who featured in the gospel reading for that day.

And a pastoral counselor I know told me after the service that she had found a young woman in tears who had been listening to the sermon assuming that it really was about Diana in some sort of allegorical way, but she was confused because of all that stuff about Mary. She had been so expecting one message that she couldn't get her head out of that and into the message that was actually being given. We are faced with a similar challenge in Galatians, and this has been so in the Western churches for the last 500 years or so.

Let me explain. The back story to the church's reading of Galatians can be summarized like this, no doubt over simply, but church historians among you will be able to fill in the gaps. Martin Luther in the early 16th century seized upon Galatians and Romans 2, but Galatians was really his favorite, as the key text for fighting the battle that he believed he had to fight.

He saw the church full of corruption and decay, and among many issues the question of purgatory loomed large. It's hard for us now to realize just how much purgatory dominated Western society and church life in the 15th and early 16th century, because it was widely assumed that only the exceptional saints would go straight to heaven and that all others, except the impenitent sinners who would go straight to hell, all others would have to do time in purgatory, partly because their souls needed cleaning up before entering heaven and partly many taught because they still needed to bear some punishment for their sins. And this went with the late medieval insistence on the proper performance of all kinds of religious duties as a way of accumulating righteousness before God.

And Luther reckoned that if St Paul had been faced with that set of questions, he would have replied that the death of Jesus had dealt with all of that and that all that mattered was faith. As regards purgatory itself, the idea that one might still need punishment after death was ruled out because Jesus in his death had taken the punishment on our behalf, and the idea that one's soul still needed purifying after death was ruled out because, as Paul explains in Romans 6, death itself finishes sin. Now, at that level, I agree with Luther against his context, but actually the problem went much deeper.

The Western Church has continued to think in terms of going to heaven or going to hell as the framework for the gospel, but and it's a big part. The Bible story is basically not about us going somewhere, but about the creator God coming to live with us. The last scene in the Bible in Revelation 21 declares that the dwelling of God is with humans as the New Jerusalem comes down from heaven to earth to join the two together.

Actually, the doctrine of the Trinity is all about this. As God the creator is characterized

by overflowing love, God the Son is the Word who became flesh and pitched his tent in our midst. God the Spirit is the one who is sent into our hearts and into the world, animating and directing Jesus followers in their mission to make God's kingdom on earth a reality as it is in heaven.

Now, looking at it like this is revolutionary, and we need to be part of that revolution today. The Western reading of Scripture in general and Galatians in particular ever since Luther has assumed the medieval framework going to heaven or its alternatives and have assumed that Galatians and similar texts are providing answers to the questions that those frameworks generate. Luther was right to challenge the system of purgatory and all that went with it.

He was right to insist on the assurance of God's forgiveness for all who believe, but as far as I can tell, he and the legacy he left never really grasped what Galatians itself was actually all about. You can actually see the problem at the level of word statistics. This letter simply isn't about sin and salvation.

The words for sin and sinner and so on are very rare in Galatians. The word for salvation never occurs at all. Paul doesn't mention heaven or hell.

These are not the subject of the letter. Justification, yes indeed, that's there, but we must not assume that what we in the Western Church have meant by justification is the same thing as what Paul meant when he used the Greek terms that we thus translate. We have to get inside this letter, which is the first ever exposition of justification by faith to see what's really going on.

Now, these are big and controversial claims. I know that and I've tried to spell them out more in the commentary, but I hope you'll bear with me now as I spell them out in this format by going through the letter with you in these sessions together. Part of the problem has been that the Church has been resistant to understanding the New Testament in its specifically Jewish context.

This tragically is partly because of residual anti-Jewish feelings going back to medieval times, but emerging also in Martin Luther himself. It's also because Luther understood Paul's polemic against his zealous Jewish opponents as a code for his own Luther's own polemic against the works righteousness which he saw being taught by medieval Roman Catholics. And this double impetus, anti-Jewish and anti-Catholic combined, more or less guaranteed that people right through to our day would be suspicious of learning anything from the first century Jewish world.

I've had folks say to me, "How can you interpret Paul in the light of his enemies?" Surely they're the ones that are getting it wrong. We shouldn't be starting there, but that's not the point. To understand the New Testament, we need to inhabit the whole first century world, as much the Greek and the Roman as the Jewish.

But when Paul is dealing with Jewish specific issues, as he obviously is in Galatians, we need to understand as he certainly did how the Jewish people saw their life, their story, their hopes. Because it is that understanding that he sees being radically fulfilled and transformed through the gospel. And Galatians is full of that Jewish story and life and hope, going back to Abraham and forwards to the ultimate new creation.

And we therefore need to know how that Jewish story worked, and particularly what happens when you insert into that story, the fact of Israel's Messiah being crucified and then raised from the dead. And you'll find you can't just insert it into the story once it takes center stage, everything looks different as a result. You see, there's a danger which the church has not always avoided, that Jesus' death and resurrection might be snatched out of their Jewish context altogether and put into a quite different framework, where the story of Israel would serve, if anything, just as a dark backcloth, or a repository of a few distant scattered prophecies or types.

If you do that, all sorts of things get flattened out. For instance, the word *Christos*, Messiah, would become merely a proper name, Christ. And Paul's richly messianic Christology would never make sense to you.

We'll see that in Galatians two and three in particular. But to cut to the chase, here's the point. First-century Jews were not sitting around arguing about how to go to heaven when they died.

And if we attempted to say, well, that's because they were thinking in a worldly fashion, but the gospel introduces a heavenly dimension. Watch out. You are in danger of becoming a Platonist.

There were some first-century Jewish thinkers, notably Philo of Alexandria, and to some extent the person who wrote the book we call the Wisdom of Solomon, who went quite away down that Platonic road. They thought in terms of the soul making an upward journey to God. But the New Testament never talks like that.

The Pharisees like Paul and the Pharisees were very influential at the time, were concerned with God's kingdom coming on earth as in heaven, which, guess what, is of course what Jesus himself taught. They believed in the goodness of God's creation and in God's intention to rescue and renew and restore it. That's a very good reason why they believed that, because that's what passage after passage in Israel's scriptures insists upon.

So the clash between Jesus and the Pharisees and between Paul and his opponents here in Galatians was about how that would happen, not about the aim itself. How is God's kingdom going to come on earth as in heaven? So how did this work out? Well, ever since the Babylonian exile, the Judean people, particularly the rather small number that had resettled around Jerusalem and in Galilee, they not everyone came back from

Babylon, but those who did settle in the South area around Jerusalem and the North area in Galilee, they had found themselves in a kind of elongated exile with the pagans still ruling over them. You see this spelt out in Daniel chapter 9, where the elongation of the exile is specifically prophesied, not 70 years now, but 70 times 7, 490 years.

That's an important theme in many passages in the New Testament, though it's often been ignored. But the Jews of the time clung to the prophetic promises of Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel, reinforced by Zechariah and Malachi and ultimately Daniel, that one day this elongated exile would be overcome. You see, as long as the pagans were ruling over them, it didn't matter whether they were in Babylon or Syria or Egypt or anywhere else, they were still theologically, spiritually, culturally in exile, being ruled over not by their own God, but by these hated foreigners.

And so they believed that one day the present age would give way to the age to come. God himself would return to Jerusalem in person, Isaiah 52, Malachi 3, Zechariah and so on. There would be a new Exodus, that's a major theme in the New Testament, not least because, of course, Jesus chose Passover as the moment to do finally what had to be done in his own kingdom, inaugurating work.

So the New Exodus would rescue God's people from the present evil age, and it would usher in the time of new creation. There was all kinds of speculation about how that would happen, what it would look like, but that sense of the present evil age then giving birth to the age to come was very powerful. And that division between the present age and the age to come was hardwired into phariseic Judaism and Paul frames Galatians exactly within that story.

Chapter 1 verse 4, Jesus gave himself for our sins, he says, to rescue us from the present evil age. And chapter 6 verses 14 to 16, so this book ends the letter, "The Messiah's cross means," 6, 14 following, "that the world is crucified to me and I to the world since what matters above all is new creation." So living at the overlap of the ages, the old still going on and the new having broken in is a challenge. It's a bit like jet lag when you go from one side of the world to the other and your body is telling you it's one time while the sunlight outside is telling you something else.

You know how it goes if you fly, say, from the United States to Europe, suddenly it's time to wake up, but actually you feel as though it must still be the middle of the night. Paul lives with and he knows that his hearers live with a kind of theological jet lag. The present evil age is still continuing, it's still asleep in sin and corruption and decay and death, but actually Paul believes the new age has already dawned and it's time to get up and behave in the daytime manner.

So Paul shares the fundamental Jewish perception of the two ages, but he reconseives them around Jesus as Messiah. Jesus has launched the new age and his followers belong there even though the old age is still rumbling along. So for a devout Pharisee of the first

century, the world Paul knew as well as anyone, the key question was never what must I do or believe in order to get to heaven when I die.

The key question was how and when, when will Israel's God, the creator, the God of heaven reveal in action his covenant faithfulness. How will he rescue Israel from the present evil age? How will he then transform the whole creation with his justice and mercy? That's what the Scriptures had promised and Paul says again and again that his gospel is in accordance with the Scriptures. As we see in the four gospels in our New Testament canon, they all in their different ways hook into precisely those old scriptural promises and they say these are the things that are now fulfilled in Jesus.

So how is God going to do all this? Part of the answer to that question would always have been especially from the Pharisees that Israel must be faithful to Torah. There must be no going soft, no compromising, no doing deals with the pagans. Israel must be faithful and loyal to the covenant God so that the faithfulness of Israel will answer to the righteousness, the covenant faithfulness of God.

But if Israel's long years of exile are to be overcome, somehow the underlying problem must be dealt with and the underlying problem is sin. The sin of idolatry and all that went with it because that's what caused the exile in the first place as we know from passage after passage in the book, the historical books and the prophecies in the Old Testament. Of course the Gentile world was full of sinners almost by definition since they didn't have Israel's Torah and had no intention of keeping it.

That explains the general Jewish rule of not fraternizing with Gentiles, certainly not eating with them. Gentiles they believed were unclean because they worshipped idols and misbehaved as a result. Jews had to be loyal to the one God.

Idolatry was contagious and it was seriously bad for your health. That's part of the overall context within which there occur the anxieties which Paul is addressing in this letter. So you see Paul's world was indeed full of the talk of sin and salvation but not in the same mode or register as Western Christianity has imagined.

That's probably quite enough to take on board for our first session together in the next session we'll pick it up from there and see how Paul in his particular situation has to address the very specific questions which of a rism. Thank you for being with us today you've been hearing Tom introduce the new video study course on Galatians and we'll hear another segment from it next week but if you'd like to enroll in the Galatians course yourself our friends at NT Right Online are offering an exclusive podcast listener discount for the course \$10 of the usual price. That's at ntrightonline.org/askntright but the link is with today's program.

For now thanks for being with us and see you next time.