

# OpenTheo

## #207 Conversations about the afterlife with Tom Wright

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### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Heaven and Hell are the topic of today's podcast with Tom Wright answering your questions about the afterlife., What is the nature of hell and what does Tom believe about it? What can be said about annihilationist or universalist views? If our loved one's aren't with us in heaven, can we be happy there? These and more listener questions get addressed by Tom Wright in this episode. Subscribe and Rate the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast on your podcast provider! • Subscribe to the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast: <https://pod.link/1441656192> • More shows, free eBook, newsletter, and sign up to ask Tom your questions: <https://premierunbelievable.com> • For live events: <http://www.unbelievable.live> • For online learning: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/courses> • Support us in the USA: <http://www.premierinsight.org/unbelievableshow> • Support us in the rest of the world: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/donate>

### Transcript

Truly understanding your identity is a deeply personal journey and discovering who you are starts with knowing where you came from. This applies to us as individuals as well as collectively. Though it's popular to question the existence of a historic Adam and Eve, did they truly exist? Or were they merely archetypes? The truth is, much of our uniqueness as humans only makes sense in the light of the Genesis account of creation.

These questions and more are explored at length. In a free download, I believe you'll enjoy, called Don't Dismiss Adam, Eve, and the Genesis story. It's more relevant today than ever.

Discover even more about who you are and why. When you go to [premierinsight.org](http://premierinsight.org) forward slash resources and download this important resource. I encourage you to do so today.

Welcome to this replay of Ask NT Wright Anything where we go back into the archives to bring you the best of the thought and theology of Tom Wright. Answering questions

submitted by you, the listener. You can find more episodes as well as many more resources for exploring faith at [premierunbelievable.com](http://premierunbelievable.com) and registering there will unlock access through the newsletter to updates, free bonus videos, and e-books.

That's [premierunbelievable.com](http://premierunbelievable.com) and now for today's replay of Ask NT Wright Anything. The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast. Welcome back to the programme.

It's my pleasure and joy to sit down on a regular basis with Tom and Tom. We've got another set of questions for you. Tricky one today.

Hell and heaven is what we're talking about. Lots of people asking questions specifically about hell. It seems to be weighing on many people's minds.

I think it's because it's not just an abstract issue for many people. It feels like it comes directly into their world when they know people who are not Christians who seem to have rejected faith and inevitably provoke lots of questions for them about what happens next. We'll come to some of those more personal questions in a moment but let's sketch out your overall thinking on this concept of hell.

A few questions came in. A Samuel in India asks what is hell? Is the lake of fire a metaphor? Bob in Orange County says the traditional view of salvation says that if someone is not a follower of Jesus, they'll spend eternity in hell. What are your thoughts on this? Do you agree? Is there another option? So similar sorts of questions essentially is that what we're supposed to mean by hell? A lake of fire, eternal, damnation, whatever.

Yes. One needs to go back and deconstruct the way in which the modern Western picture has come about and I've often told the story of how 10 years or so ago I was at a big service in Rome sitting next to a Greek Orthodox Archimandrite and we were in the Sistine Chapel and before the procession and all the music started we were looking around and he looked at one wall and the other wall there's pictures of Moses over here, pictures of Jesus over here. He said this I understand and then he pointed at the great picture of Christ in majesty sending some people downstairs and bringing other people upstairs and he said that I don't understand that's not how we do eschatology in Greece.

Now it's one of those frustrating moments because then the music started and the procession came in and I never got to say okay so will you explain to me how you do but I think we need to remind ourselves that in the Western Medieval Church there was a massive development of hell and you see this not only in Michelangelo but in Dante of course Dante's Inferno were a great detailed tour of hell and what is happening there is a retrieval in some parts of the church of bits of ancient paganism and I was reading for quite another reason one of Plato's dialogues recently and quite clear that Plato was happy to play along with the idea that those who embraced wisdom or truth or whatever their souls would go upwards into a place of bliss and those who didn't would miss out

and their souls would go to a place of torment and that is not a Christian or a Jewish idea it's an ancient pagan idea the Christians are not thinking about where souls are going because basically the idea of a soul and that's the real thing that matters that's platonic that's not Christian though heavens there are huge debates still rumbling along and many systematic theologians today say oh no no we've got to put Plato and Christianity together we'll see be very careful because in my experience Plato usually wins when you do that but isn't just Plato lots of others as well so when we read depending on which translation of the Bible you've got the word hell we have to be very careful if that immediately conjures up those medieval visions then distance yourself from that this is I mean may I just make a general point here because it comes up in my teaching a lot and did just in the class yesterday that where people only speak one language characteristically English and Americans then it's very easy for them to imagine that this word is a counter which refers to one clear object so that whenever we meet that word that's what it means and as a Bible translator I want to say with lots and lots and lots of words words are very slippery things and between language anyone who grows up in central Europe speaking four or five languages knows perfectly well that words aren't exactly the same and likewise that they pick up different layers of meaning from what the cultures they've been in so in the modern western world and in the church we were all taught as children yeah there's these two destinations and this is the thing that matters in Christianity is you're going to hell heaven or you're going to hell and I want to say the New Testament really doesn't see it like that and whether you go with Greek Orthodox and say we've got to do it differently it's quite clear in the New Testament we're talking about new creation new heavens and new earth and the real twining and throwing in the Bible is between heaven and earth not between heaven and hell and Paul says in Ephesians 1 that God's design is to sum up in Christ all things in heaven and on earth and that summing up that new creation is the reality one of the best writers who grappled with this was one of C.S. Lewis's early works *The Great Divorce* where he has okay this sharp opposition between hell and heaven but for him hell is this thin in substantial place which consists almost entirely of denial it's denial of goodness denial of the goodness of creation denial of the goodness of oneself so that all that is left is a grumble and a moan and something which is as near to nothingness as it could be in a sense because it's all very inwardly focused it's inwardly focused but it's rejecting God the Creator and therefore rejecting the wonderful new creation which is more real than the present world and Lewis manages in that book to convey this idea of a heaven which is actually a new earth where every blade of grass is so strong that if you walk on it barefoot it'll go straight through you etc and that's one way of looking at different kinds of reality in other words let's get away from the idea that these are equal and opposite destinations and particularly let's get away from the idea which sadly was common coin in much medieval Christianity that one of the delights of heaven was contemplating the tortures of the damned and that's that's there in some ordinary Christian spirituality through to the 19th century has rather ruled that out of course if and when God does justice and mercy for all the earth we will all celebrate that and if that means God saying

a firm no to anyone and anything that has utterly corrupted themselves and everybody else as best they can then we should rejoice that God and God's way and God's justice have won the day but we should grieve over the fact that some who are made in God's image have actually said I don't want to reflect the Creator God into the world I want to do my own thing which is it is about nothingness it's about denial it's about saying no rather than saying yes is that helpful it's a very good starting point and to go on from there it might be helpful if you have any thoughts on some of the predominant different ideas that have been put out by theologians and thinkers about hell so Jennifer in Louisville Kentucky says what do you believe the bible teaches about hell for instance there's eternal conscious torment annihilationism or indeed Christian universalism or ultimate reconciliation Danny in Portland has a similar question asking is there a strong case for annihilationism in the bible or is eternal conscious torment the only option and also why doesn't the Hebrew bible make a stronger case for hell seems important maybe to lay it out clearly are humans eternal even if they don't accept eternal life in Jesus so it's a kind of a whole variety of questions in there but let's start with some of the terminology first are you familiar with the idea of annihilationism oh yeah what do you understand well to be um I would understand when people talk about annihilation that this is about saying that those who do not choose to follow Jesus in this life and do not have them themselves transformed by his spirit in this life will find that after this life they don't have an immortal soul which is going on and on and on because immortality according to First Timothy is something that only God has and that remains God's gift and so there's a case to be made on that basis and this is basically a denial of Platonism a denial of the idea that we all have a soul which pre-existed our bodies and which will post-exist our our death um it's a way of saying no that's a Greek Hellenistic philosophical idea it's not a biblical idea of course and this is another of those linguistic slippages you find the word soul quite frequently but that translates in the New Testament the Greek word psuki or is incike or psychedelic or whatever um but the Greek term psuki as spoken by a first century Jew would be translating the Hebrew word nephesh which actually means the whole person more what we would call a person than a soul as a disembodied thing so these are typical of the muddles that we get into so back to the eternal conscious torment or the um or but then is the lake of fire a metaphor well so much of the biblical language is a is a web of not entirely consistent metaphors they don't have to be consistent metaphors don't need to be you can mix them and it's a way of saying it's something like that and it's something like that but the fact that there's these different pictures alerts us to the fact that these are not sort of chemical labels on the bottle this is what's in this so back to annihilation I think my view some have mistaken my view for annihilation the way that I would put it is this I think I say this briefly and surprised by hope but um let me just spell it out that we are made in God's image and I take that to mean that we are designed to stand at the dangerous interface between heaven and earth reflecting God into the world and reflecting the praises of the world back to God's one of the reasons Christian worship matters so much as we're summing up the praises of creation and articulating them but we are designed

to be two-way mirrors like that reflecting in both directions and we are also called as christians to stand at the dangerous interface between present and future that God's new world has broken in in Jesus and by the spirit and we are called to be part of that even while our bodies and so much about us is still dirty and dusty with the muck of this world and will one day decay and die um so we're called to be in between people and that's dangerous and difficult so dangerous and difficult that often people say I don't want to do that I don't want to be a god reflector I don't want to be part of God's future in the present I'll just live in the present the way it is and the dangerous thing is that that is a vote to say I really don't want to be an image bearer but part of the logic of being an image bearer because that's what you're made to be is that if you decide to worship that which is not God your image bearing this of the true God will corrupt and fracture distort and eventually decay entirely so that it seems to me possible to hold in one's mind a category which would be of a creature that once was a genuine god reflector but is now no longer and again back to C.S. Lewis in the Narnia stories um there are some of the talking beasts who choose not to follow Aslan and they remain as animals but they're no longer talking animals and I think Lewis is saying it's another metaphor there is something about being a creature that once was and now isn't and there's something about that way of telling the story which is to say that I'm not I'm not universalist the warnings about final loss in the New Testament are so clear that I don't think these are just designed to scare people etc I think these are real that is the prospect of final loss and Paul Paul himself says um I pommel my body and subdue it that's having preached to others I myself should be a castaway and if even Paul could say that about himself so coming back to the labels because people often it's helpful let's let's put universities into one side for the moment but eternal conscious torment annihilationism it strikes me from what you said that there's there's things you're taking possibly from both but you're not committed to either so there's a sense in which there could be an eternal nature to this constant sort of becoming of nothing this this this this if you like yes on going I mean part again part of our difficulty with the word eternal is that we hear it in platonic a temporal and and I think time matters actually but but then equally annihilation is in the idea you know which to put it very this is someone ceases to exist if they if they don't choose to be with christ then that in a sense it sounds like what you're describing there is the loss of anything significant in terms of what it means to be human yes and so on and of course this is difficult because the older you get the more you realize we're actually talking about people that I know and love of course yeah and if that isn't so for us then we've got a very small circle of friends as it were and so it can never be said in an arrogant way or as we said in a previous podcast as though we were playing God and we can decide who's in who's out God has got many many surprises but I do think that there is the possibility and the reality that those who say not for me thank you in whatever way not necessarily an explicit rejection of an explicit message but who see that possibility of opening themselves to the demanding love of God and who say no not for me that for them there would be a state of having once been in some strong sense a genuine human and now being that no longer some people find that offensive that's we

have to say something in the middle there without wanting to put Lewis on a on a pile with the Bible here he did make some I think very in my view quite quite helpful ways of understanding the idea of the gates of hell a lot from the inside those sort of metaphors when when we won't say to God thy will be done God says thy will be done yes it's what do you make of that idea that the hell in that sense is not something imposed upon people but rather some people and I see this very vividly in Matthew chapter 18 with the parable of the unforgiving servant who can't possibly pay the millions that his debt has run up so the master says I forgive you and then he goes out straight away and grabs somebody by the throat and says you owe me 10 pence I want it right now or you're in jail and the master hears about it and says okay you're in jail until and Jesus then says scarily that's what my heavenly father will do to you if you don't forgive your brother from your heart and people have said oh Jesus can't possibly have said but I think the point is this that that the bit of us bit is a metaphor but you know what I mean the bit of us which opens the door to forgive is the bit of us which opens the door to forgiveness if we shut that door then we shut that door and I think that's getting at the same point that Lewis is making there something psychological personal going on there we'll be back with more of your questions in a moment's time ask anti-write is of course brought to you by premiere in partnership with SBCK and anti-write online and anti-write online is a great place to find all of Tom's online theology courses taught in person by Tom in video format now the Lord's Prayer is something they're currently focusing on it's a brand new course in which Tom will help you to think about the context that informs the Lord's Prayer the deeper ideas in it you may not have noticed practical ways that it could help shape your daily spiritual practices it's it's a prayer we think we know so well but how well do we actually know it podcast listeners can get this new video course on the Lord's Prayer absolutely free by going to anti-write online dot org forward slash ask anti-write before we rejoin today's episode I need to tell you about an urgent challenge premiere insight is facing today as we begin this new year twenty thousand dollars is needed by February the 29th in order to keep premiere insights strong and financially on target at the outset of this new year that couldn't be more important as you know or said to Christianity is in rapid decline across the United States so many Christians feel ill-equipped to defend their faith against the angry and antagonistic rhetoric of our day but at the very same time there's also a growing spiritual openness with 84 percent of Americans saying they're open to a conversation about Jesus both these trends mean that America is crying out for a clear and courageous Christian voice in a voice that not only equips believers to stand firm but one that also winsomely engages skeptics and seekers with the claims of the gospel that voice is premiere insight your gift today will help keep premiere insight strong at this pivotal moment so please give generously to help meet the twenty thousand dollar need you can give online at premiere insight dot org forward slash anti-write that's premiere insight dot org forward slash anti-write thank you so much as you said this this does have a personal dimension to it there there are people we know and love and and this idea that we won't share you know again we're using picture language but but eternity with them that weighs heavily on many people

now i've had two people interestingly both in Australia ask similar questions i don't know if they're related and submitted these separately but firstly rusty in australia says how can there be no tears in heaven if there are some members of our family that we dearly love who perished due to their own choice to reject god and follows that up to say in the context of one of your past writings rethinking the tradition to quote if god is indeed to put the world to rights and if he has indeed given his human creatures the freedom we sense ourselves to have including the freedom to reject his will and his way the eventual judgment will involve the loss of those who have exercised that freedom to their own ultimate cost and will on australia ask a very similar question saying how would you advise someone to deal with the deep pain of eternal damnation of a deceased loved one who was full of kindness for their family and community but could never embrace christianity because they didn't see it providing strong enough evidence for them to adhere to it with any kind of honesty in fact indeed they found it led to deeply in human ways of living well as i said before and that's a great question as i said before the the way in which many people have been totally put off by what they have seen in the church is an utter scandal and as one looks back through church history of course there have been many periods of history when you look at what the church had become and it was thoroughly corrupt and politicized and you know it is a miracle that the church is still there granted all the things that have gone on but of course the church has always really been at its heart the very ordinary men and women who've said their prayers and loved their neighbors and if people haven't seen that then that is a real shame and reflects extremely badly on the christians who they have seen so that's back to god knows that person's heart and the way the question was asked was in such a way as to what a fine person what a fine example of christianity and the reason they rejected explicit faith was understandable and i want to say god knows that person's heart i don't and lord is the person is asking the question and god will do the right thing and i think that sense of utter trust in god which also comes through then to the first of those questions that ultimately it's very interesting in the new testament we come to the idea of death and a funeral and so on wanting to be told that we will be reunited with those whom we've loved and i think part of the renunciation involved in the gospel which is really hard is to say god demands our hundred percent allegiance and god will give us whatever he wants us to have with that and just as there are many people for whom as we say life hasn't turned out as they hoped nevertheless god loves them and cherishes them and will one day wipe away all the tears of disappointment and frustration etc from their eyes so we just have to believe that if god is as we know who to be in jesus then he will in fact wipe away tears from our eyes and i think the fact that god will do that it doesn't say god will do it in the way we want or god will give us the kind of comfort we want there will be a layer of comfort which will be beyond what we can presently imagine because we have to face the fact that all our language about the future as i've said often enough is like a set of signposts pointing into a fog and we can tell the truth as best we can but the signpost isn't a photograph of what we'll find when we go through the fog and end up there so the difference in the signpost and the reality is really rather

important i mean there's this question from muzzdee i think reflects for me when they say how can there be no tears in heaven if some members of our family we really love perish yeah because of their choice to object in i suppose i think a lot of images and i hear many christians without christians saying this i'm so looking forward to being reunited with xy and z did you know and in a sense yes for those who who are who are in christ there is that sense but it strikes me if that's all that heaven is a sort of reunion with friends and family that's it's a sub biblical view of very much so and and i mean there's there's two things going on there and you would expect me to tease this out at this point curiously the bible isn't very interested in where people are immediately after death if that was the name of the game then the new testament is very misleading because there's only half a dozen passages which even touch on that there's jesus saying to the brigand today you'll be with me in paradise but we know that three days later according to luke he's back again and he's not bringing that brigand with him so what happened to him well paradise is the holding place the temporary resting place before the resurrection john 14 in my father's house are many dwelling places but jesus then says he will come back he will return and john makes it quite clear throughout the gospel that that what happens after death is only temporary before the eventual new creation and paul saying in first krinthian as second krinthian's five our desire is to be away from the body and at home with the lord but then he says that there is coming a great judgment and then there will be the resurrection so that the the temporary at home with the lord like in philipins one he says my desire is to depart and be with the messiah that's the two stage-ness of the christian hope which most western christians still stumble over and i you know i've been banging on about this for a long time and many people i know have got it many others simply haven't and they flick back into the default mode of the going-to-heaven thing which is ultimately platonism yeah just to finish up with this question by roste granted that we may once we're in the new creation look back on things with a very different perspective to to how we see things now nonetheless right now that person is is feeling a pain for those who have reject chosen to reject or appear to this point at least have rejected that so what what what might be your practical advice to someone who simply is just grieved for the fact that many people they know loved ones are not following christ yeah i mean obviously to hold such people in prayer and i find for myself within my tradition and as many many christians have done that the breaking of bread the communion the eucharist called it what you will is a moment when we can come with our hopes and fears and we kind of lay them on the altar and we receive back the broken bread which is jesus own life and as we something about the empty hands which are stretched out to receive which are saying i have put my hopes and desires and dreams on the altar and there they are and what i get back is what i get back and there's a humility about that which doesn't take the pain away but kind of relocate it does something different i found as a pastor again and again some of the real difficulties when you wrestle with people facing real problems to go through that discipline of saying here they are and now god gives me back what he gives me back and in the light of that i can go and sit with them again and weep with them



again and pray with them again and that that's i don't think we should expect god to solve all our problems overnight and say okay here's the answer so that's quite all right but i do think one can in prayer entrust people to the care of god i'm not saying that one should pray that somebody who has explicitly rejected jesus in this life should have a second chance here after many people have toyed with that idea i'm saying that one can perfectly reasonably say lord seren says life is bound up with mine and i have loved them and i would love to believe that you love them as well please can i leave them with you and maybe that's a discipline of prayer which will take years in some cases but um like many other things it's a modern idea that if there is a god he should sort out all our problems straight away most of the ancient christians would never have thought like that let's just turn with the last five minutes we've got to the other label that we've we raised earlier on christian universalism or ultimate reconciliation um two similarish questions interestingly similar names as well joshin boston first of all says first of all thank you tom for your incredible work it's been so helpful in my faith my question is um i've always assumed the vangelical teaching i received was mostly correct but i began reading certain ancient fathers gregory of nisa being a good example and they seem to think that salvation is universal would love to hear your thoughts on that and then we've been talking about sia's louis who of course was a great fan of george mcdonald and josh you in san diego says um i was cross as to your thoughts on a hopeful universalism similar to that of george mcdonald if as you haven't described so beautifully it isn't god in his intention to sum up all things on heaven and on earth and himself and wishes to free all creation from its bondage would this not at the very least lead you to hope in the reconciliation of all yeah i understand that i mean it's interesting that louis himself having made george mcdonald quite a guru didn't go that route and louis is quite clear that he is sticking with some sort of ultimate um both and there rather than saying all goes together into universalism i mean as i read the new testament uh both the gospels and paul it just seems to me that a universalism has to dodge some of the really tough issues i ran into this recently rather uncomfortably when i reviewed david bentley hearts translation of the new testament and i was asked to review it and so i did and i was particularly struck with the way in which he who is obviously universalist was twisting and turning to avoid saying what the text actually says at certain points which do see the possibility of whether you call it final loss or something and clearly he wanted to say that the idea of any sort of loss or hell is a western invention going back to augustin rather than in the bible but it does seem to be there in the bible unless you really are going to distort it so that for me is is kind of an anchor but then i do think as we've been exploring before we have to say that our pictures of heaven and hell is equal and opposite are simply wrong that's not how the bible sees it and that it's a major issue for us to unthink the mental habits of the last two or three centuries of western christianity and to think in terms of a new creation in which god will sum up all things in heaven and earth but within which there will be no place for as the book of revelation says for people who love and make lies for people who are opposed to the truth for people who are implacably saying no to god's will and that's part of the dignity of being human it seems

to me that god will say as you said before um okay having made you in my image i'm you sadly seem not to worship me and so you are becoming progressively less and less human um and it is only those who are reflecting my image who will be welcome in the final new creation unless you're getting there are easy ways out like john hick last generation would say that that in eternity god will have an infinite number of chances to present the gospel to such people again to which i think the new testament would say the revelation of god self in jesus was the ultimate revelation and if you deny that then you've that was the last i mean what's often implicit in any kind of universalism or hopeful universalism is is the idea of post-mortem ability to to be presented again and to be won over by the love of god and so and so do you do you simply say i don't think that's i think the new testament's actually the gold standard here and the teaching of jesus within that and by the way many of jesus' warnings about the danger of loss are very specific to political and social warnings so that in luke 13 when he says unless you repent you will all likewise perish he's talking about pilgrims being cut down by roman swords in the temple and luke's gospel is very clear that the danger of a roman invasion with all the loss of life that that would involve is hanging on the decision as to whether the jewish people of jesus day will follow his way of peace or not and that comes to a head in luke 19 where those warnings are very explicit these are not warnings about frying in hell after you die they're warnings about the devastating destruction which of course is what happened in ad 70 so we have to be careful not instantly to translate those into traditional pictures of hell and so there's a lot of hermeneutical reading work to be done um but out of all of that um i think there is a sort of romantic hope within modern christ modern western christianity that actually god is such a nice old chap that that he he will he will eventually say there that's all right um and i i feel the tug of that myself one of my friends and colleagues where i teach now says we should all want to be universalist even if we then find we can't be and there is because we should want as an act of love that all these people we know and love would actually come to the fullness of life which god has for them we ought to want that we ought not to relish the thought oh so it's going to hell i mean we'll close off with this but i've often felt when the person says well i you know i've lived a good life and i don't think god's going to reject me when i get there you know the question is well for me is often well will you want what's on offer because we're very often used to being the king of our own world but we're being asked to enter someone else's kingdom yes and that's a very different prospect to i don't know an eternity of playing golf and sort of having a nice life which i think is the modern yes very often the conception people have yes that they're being denied something that other people are being given yes yes though it's interesting in contemporary secular thoughts think of julian barns' novel history of the world in ten and a half chapters which ends with a kind of a secular heaven which is so sort of nice and schmaltzer that after a little while the chap sides that's enough of that good board of that place exactly exactly and so be careful what you wish for kind of thing an easy universalism might not be as easy as we imagine thank you very much for tackling a difficult subject thank you on this week's edition of the podcast if you want more editions of the podcast do go and check

them out at the website as ever it's askentyrite.com but for now tom thanks for being with me this week thank you very much you've been listening to the askentyrite anything podcast let other people know about this show by rating and reviewing it in your podcast provider it's the story that rocked the uk church allegations of parabees leveled at sole survivor and its leader mike plavachi learn what happened by hearing from those at the heart of it all and find out how we the church can learn important lessons sole survivors a new podcast from premier christianity magazine download it today at premier dot plus or find it on apple spotify or your chosen podcast platform