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#210 The Problem of Evil and Suffering: questions with NT Wright (Replay)

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

In today's Episode theologian and historian Tom Wright looks at listener questions on one of the biggest topics and questions the Christian faith faces today. What is the nature of free will, does Christianity truly offer an answer to the problem of evil and suffering? Will it be possible for there to be another 'fall' in the new creation? And the hosts of the Libertarian Christian Podcast have some questions for Tom about living as Christians in today's world. This episode originally aired on: 11 September 2019

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Transcript

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There's truly no other result. 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. And registering there will answer any questions you want to answer in the comments.

We'll unlock access through the newsletter to updates, free bonus videos, and e-books. That's premierunbelievable.com. And now for today's replay of Ask NT Wright Anything. We ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

We throw all kinds of things at you every couple of weeks, Tom, and today is no different week doing probably one of the biggest questions that has existed since time immemorial, a problem of evil and suffering. I'm not expecting you to solve it necessarily today, but it is posed in some interesting ways today. I suppose whenever we come to do a podcast and questions and you're there as the person answering them, I suppose it's always with the caveat that some things don't really have very neat packaged answers, do they? And we can only give people ways to try and think through things and everyone's different as to how they're ultimately going to resolve some of these big questions in their own mind.

Sure, yeah, that's undoubtedly true. And the question of the problem of evil is the archetypal one. And I've come to the view that even though we don't have a good answer to the way the question is normally posed, or has been in the last 200 years, 300 years anyway, we do have a very good answer for why we should expect that problem to come up in the way that it does.

And that is if we believe that God is the good and wise creator, then evil doesn't make sense, and that's the point. And the danger then is if we as clever theologians or philosophers think we can make sense of it, then we're saying that actually God created a world within which, yeah, there's a place for evil and we'll let evil exist so that it can do this and that and the other, which is actually a very dark conclusion to reach. And of course, people can pose the question then in terms of Genesis 3. Where did the snake come from? Why was there a snake in the garden in the first place? There is something then about the freedom of God and the freedom which God gives to creation, which remains a mystery.

But I remember when I was teaching in Oxford, one of my fellow examiners one year for the finals paper, set a question, would it be immoral to try to solve the problem of evil? And I remember looking at that and thinking, what an odd thing. And then I thought, oh, yes, I see. Because if you were able to say, yes, we understand why there is evil, because it isn't this and this tick, we've solved that one.

Then what you're saying is something pretty drastic about the way the world is. And I bet you can guess who the examiner in question is. Rowan Williams.

So perhaps we should expect that. And I think Rowan would say emphatically actually it would be immoral because you would then be accusing God of having made a world in which this was just part of the way stuff was. Well, there's one general question which I think sets the scene up really quite well from Deb in Garland, North Carolina, who emails in to say, hello, I'm an atheist who's interested in faith.

Could you explain free will and how it relates to evil? I've had Christian friends explain that we've been given free will to love God, but also free will to do evil. But that makes it sound as if God allows cruelty to happen to innocent people so that he or it or she can be loved. Am I misunderstanding the concept of free will and the reason behind it? By the way, I've just started your book Paul for everyone, Rowan's part one.

Oh, well, well, that's funny enough that that will cover some of this grand way too, of course. A bit, a bit. Though I'm delighted if somebody who's a self-confessed atheist would be starting with a commentary on Rowan's and a great place to start in all sorts of ways.

Though there might be other places you could start as well, but wherever you start, just find your way through, I would say. Of course, part of the puzzle is that for the atheist, there isn't a problem. For the atheist, there's a problem of good because if the world is simply the random product of blind chance with atoms bouncing off each other or swerving as in Epicureanism and just producing new life forms, there is no reason to suppose that we would like the resultant mess, and the problem with natural selection, which is a way of solving that problem, to say, well, the survival of the fittest, so we're getting better and stronger and better and stronger, is that the survival of the fittest assumes lots and lots and lots of unfit life forms, which just fall by the wayside.

And so if you go that, it's basically new Epicurean forms of philosophy, then you really have a problem. Why would we say that anything is good? And the answer that the Epicurean gives is, oh, good simply means I like this. But actually, that's not what most people mean by good.

And if somebody tortures somebody else and then when challenged says, well, I like doing this, most of us would say, sorry, that's not good enough. And even if those, I mean, many people have tried to still tie it to an actualistic account of good saying, well, we know that torturing people is bad for the flourishing of our species in an evolutionary sense. Even that I found doesn't really get to the root of why we disagree with it.

It's quite a utilitarian argument. Quite. There isn't an eight moral sense.

And even though that does vary from culture to culture in certain interesting ways, it can't quite be eradicated and one of the things I've tried to argue in the Gifford lectures is that there are certain things like justice, spirituality, relationships, beauty, freedom, truth and power, which all of them have a certain draw across cultures and across time. But equally, all of them are puzzling because we know that justice matters, but we all are inclined to bend it when it's in our own favor. And there seems to be in our own favor and same with truth and power and so on.

And that's part of the problem of being human in this world. And that's part of setting the parameters for why questions like the problem of evil have to be dealt with within this

larger whole. It's not enough to say, here are these things that we deem to be evil, both human evil and so-called natural evil, though whether an earthquake is evil or not, it's just what the Earth's crust does.

But it produces suffering for people to build houses and skyscrapers on it. Of course, absolutely. And in a sense, though, this specific question is about free will.

And there's been a typical defence of evil beings as well. God gives us freedom. Obviously, that enables us to experience love, relationship with God with each other, all the goods, but it comes at the cost of what we do on the negative side.

Quite freedom. Now, I mean, part of the problem there is that the puzzle of so-called free will, philosophers have been bashing their heads against this forever. And you end up, if you're not careful, so defending freedom that we do end up as random particles.

We're so free that actually we're just bouncing around and we think we're making choices, but really we are so totally free that we're just random nonsense. And that's why in biblical thought, you tend not to get an emphasis on free will as normally conceived philosophically, but on responsibility that humans are given the dignity of making choices. And as we said in a previous podcast about prayer, God seems to want to work in the world through human beings who are learning to make wise good healing choices.

The other problem, of course, about free will is that however much you use a free will defense for saying, therefore, we humans mess stuff up and maybe that's an inevitable result of the way God made the world. That doesn't solve earthquakes and tsunamis and volcanoes and so on. And there the problem is, well, the humans had the responsibility to build houses on that point, but often they didn't know.

And this is why, of course, the Lisbon earthquake in 1755 was such a major philosophical disaster in the Western world as well as a physical and human life disaster that it made people think, if there was a God, he wouldn't have let this happen. But here's the really interesting point that I've puzzled over. This has seemed to be a problem in modern Western thought since maybe 1650, 1700, in a way which it never was in earlier Christian thought.

You know, Augustine knows about all these things that happen. And he basically says, yeah, that's just the way the world is, but God is in charge and God will rescue us, et cetera. Now, he often seems to have thought in terms of being rescued from the world and going to heaven.

But in the New Testament as well, Jesus and his first followers knew perfectly well that there were things like earthquakes and volcanoes and that people suffer and die in all sorts of ways. Life was, as the phrase goes, nasty, brutish and short for a great many

people. And they don't regard that as, oh, dear, maybe there isn't a God after all.

Rather, they see it in terms of the creator God has set in motion a purpose to rescue the world and to restore and heal the world. So that there's prophetic visions of new creation, like the wolf lying down with the lamb in Isaiah and so on. These are shimmering in the background as saying, there is a God, he is the good creator.

There's a real mess at the moment, and he has got his own way of working to solve it, which won't necessarily be the way that we might like. But that's partly because we don't understand his ways. And drawing out this part of the question from Deb, which is I think where the crux of it is, can perhaps accept that we need free will to choose to love and to be human and all those good things.

But says, if it means God allows cruelty to happen to innocent people as the cost of that, I guess Deb is struggling with whether the cost is worth the good, if you like. Is this the gamble the risk that God has taken? And the Christian answer comes back again and again to say, the story that we tell is a story in which God himself has come in person to take the full force of all that evil unto himself. And one of the, I wrote a little book on the problem of evil, oh, 10 or 15 years ago, called *Evil and the Justice of God*.

And one of the insights which helped me as I was working through that, it's only a short book, was that the gospels themselves tell the story of Jesus and his announcing of God's kingdom and his going to the cross. But it's not just about Jesus doing that. As Jesus comes and says, it's time for God to be king, follow me and it's going to happen.

Then evil of all sorts seems to be drawn to him as though to a magnet that there are plotting scribes and Pharisees and there are shrieking demons in the synagogue and some of his own followers get it wrong and plot against him and people are out to get him. And the story, you know, it's like the plot of a movie where you realize that from every corner, there are insidious forces and whispering voices in his own head. And then the whole thing rushes together, puts him on the cross and then something has happened on the cross through which the power of that evil is broken.

So this isn't a philosophical answer. It's a way of saying that the philosophical question needs to be confronted by the actual Israel narrative reaching its climax in Jesus. And then the church's agenda in the power of the Spirit must be to say, okay, if we are the people who celebrate Jesus' victory over the powers of evil, we must be the people in and through whose communities injustice, oppression, wickedness, lies are actually being dealt with.

And that's why it was interesting that it is this Romans part one that Deb is studying because when I think of a passage that deals with that, it is Romans 8 and it is the fact that Paul acknowledges we live in this broken world, this bondage to decay. And yet simply accepts that and says that we are the ones who are being born for this new world

and God works all things together for the good of those who love us. Yes, yes, and that in Romans 8 we who believe in Jesus are being scooped up into that purpose so that the suffering of Jesus through which the basic victory was won is then reinstanced in the groaning of Jesus followers.

As we don't know what to pray for as we all were surrounded by so much suffering and rubbish and horrible things and we stand there saying, Lord, I'd love to pray about this, I'm not even sure what. And Paul says at that moment the Spirit is groaning within us and the Father is listening and in that dialogue of Father and Spirit we are being conformed to the image of the Son. And so this puts the mystery of the Trinity, if you like, at the heart of the biblical answer to the problem of evil, not that it's an answer that will satisfy the philosophers, but that it's a way of translating the question into a narrative and historical mode and we are part of that history.

What's the next book that Deb should read once they've completed Paul for everyone? Well, perhaps even in the justice of God. Okay, yeah. Well, whatever helps.

I hope this answer has helped, Deb, and we wish you the very best in your continuing journey as you explore that. Moving on to a slightly different angle on this, we talked about some of those Catholic philosophical issues around free will and love and evil and so on. But Paul in Kansas asks many of the theodices I've heard on why God would allow so much suffering and sin in the world are predicated on the necessity and goodness of free will.

But then my question is about the new heaven, a new earth. Is this a literal place where believers are gathered with glorified bodies who love God? Does not this new state of existence also require the presence of free will and would not that in turn necessitate the possibility of another fall or sin itself? And yeah, that's an interesting question. Are we somehow experiencing free will in a different way in the new creation that doesn't mean the possibility of sin? It is a great question.

And I think the New Testament is very much aware that that question could be raised. And I think, though it's a very dark passage, that that's why towards the end of the book of Revelation, that the Satan, the old dragon, is released for a short time and then is finally given his total comeuppance. And I think that's a richly symbolical way of saying we can imagine that there might be a snake in the new garden, but actually the snake has done his worst and we are quite sure that he's been dispatched.

So that's one possible way in. Another way is to say this is the problem with our analysis of free will and the use of that free will defense could push in that direction. It's interesting in America at the moment, much more than in Britain, I think there are quite a lot of younger Christians who are being quite philosophically savvy in a way that their British counterparts probably aren't, but who get sometimes a kind of rationalistic apologetic, which would include that sort of free will defense.

And I want to say just be careful what you do with that, because it does lead you into strange places. And part of the dynamic of freedom in the New Testament is that, as Paul would say, we are set free from slavery to sin in order to be enslaved to righteousness. And Paul is saying that as a deliberate paradox in Romans 6, but then he fills that out in Romans 8 with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

And the point of the spirit is that when the spirit is at work, then we are truly free, and there is a freedom about that. And this is, it's like, if I'm driving a car, I am free, I'm free to steer into the path of an oncoming truck, I'm free to steer off the road into a ditch. But actually, if I use those freedoms, I will not be free to drive this car anymore, I may not even be free to be alive anymore.

And so freedom is a little more complicated than simply I can do what I like. And you've used that, I know the analogy of music before, that it's only once we have learned and understood the boundaries of how music works, that we can then do the improvisation. Exactly.

Because we need the boundaries to be free. Exactly. And certainly improvisation or the brilliant violinist or pianist who learns to play the concerto by the long hours of discipline.

I listened to something on the radio the other day, the professional pianist talking about the boringness of practice. Take the same phrase over and over, you play it backwards and sideways. And he said, only when you've done that for a few hours, then when you come to play that sonata, concerto, whatever it is, there is a freedom.

You can now pour yourself into it knowing that your fingers will do what they should. And this is the paradox of freedom and virtue, that virtue is a second nature. It's a second freedom, if you like, that you submit yourself to the discipline of learning the stuff in order that you can then freely practice it.

And this, I suppose, is the answer we might give to the skeptic who says, why would I want to be a Christian? It's all about rules and regulations. I want to be free. Well, the fact is, you're in bondage to something else.

We were always master to something or other. And we might still make it God and His Word. Yes, quite demanding.

But yes, that's part of the appeal of the gospel. If the son sets you free, you will be genuinely free. And that's very controversial when Jesus says that to his Judean interlocutors.

They say, we've never been slave to anyone, which is an odd thing for first-century Jews to say, but they do. And Jesus says, no, there is a deeper sense of freedom. And therefore, it's really about what does it mean to be human.

And being human doesn't mean being free like somebody. You know, supposing I'm randomly dropped from a helicopter into a strange city where I know nobody, but I've got some money in my pocket. I'm free to do what I like all day, but I really have no idea what I ought to be doing.

Well, that's a sort of freedom. But actually, it's not nearly as exciting and interesting as the freedom which I have when there's a well-planned trip to somewhere that I know and love, where I can go to a football match or a music event or whatever it might be. And I'm totally free because I have made the effort to be within this context which enhances who I am, instead of just wandering around thinking, what am I doing here? Well, two kind of different strands that we've taken there in this whole discussion on evil and freedom.

But I hope that's helped both Paul and Deb. Where I've often simply landed is that there are no easy answers to the problem of evil. But for me, I'd rather live with evil and suffering as a mystery in Christianity than it simply being meaningless, as you said in an eighth purely atheistic worldview.

And that's, I mean, the classic thing which I think it was Martin Luther said, there are certain things we can understand by the light of nature, but there are mysteries there which we can only understand in the light of grace. And even within the grace of the Christian life, there are things which we can't understand which we will understand in the light of glory. Now, I would want to nuance his vision of the future somewhat differently, but it's as though at every stage we should expect there to be mysteries and puzzles.

And if there weren't, then I'm not sure that God would be God. Then he would just be a function of our little limited understanding. Before we rejoin the rest of today's podcast, I have a very special offer for you to help you have an even more meaningful spiritual experience this Easter.

As you know, NT Wright is without doubt one of the greatest Christian thinkers and apologists of our time. And some of Tom Wright's answers to questions about Jesus' death, resurrection and return are some of the most poignant and thought-provoking. That's why we've created a brand new downloadable devotional resource that's perfect for the Easter season featuring these questions and Tom's answers.

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That's premierinsight.org forward slash NT Wright. Thank you. Let's turn to another set of issues now.

We've talked about the big philosophical questions, theological question of evil suffering, free will. This is a much more practical how we are to live as Christians in the world that we find ourselves in. And these questions are both being submitted by Doug Stewart from the Libertarian Christian Podcast.

If people enjoy this podcast, they may also enjoy Doug's one. And the first question from Doug is, Tom, many Christians like to use the Bible as a moral guidebook and extrapolate from that what their fellow citizens must live by. And the debate tends to circle around what good biblical politics looks like.

Personal moralism on the one side and corporate moralism on the other. But can Christians really take the scripture and use them to tell the rest of their country what laws they must live under? Does this get too close to a theocracy? Great question. And it looks very different from America than it would in Britain.

Or indeed in France, or indeed Germany, or indeed Africa, et cetera, et cetera. In other words, I understand where in America things have swung this way on that because by constitution 240 years ago and every it was, they said, the church and state separate. And that's been very difficult to live with.

And many Americans today are now having to come to terms with the fact that actually if you say total separation, then you can have an atheistic state which goes charging off and does its own thing, leaving the Christians who thought they were in quite a friendly environment feeling decidedly discriminated against. But how do you put that back together without producing the sort of nonsense that many people think were going on under rather fierce Calvinistic legislation earlier on, et cetera, et cetera. In Britain, we don't have that discussion.

We have very different one. And we have muddled along with an uneasy alliance, a very British fashion of church and state which Americans look at and say, how does that work? And the answer is, well, it does and it doesn't. And you have to live with it and yes, it's all very peculiar.

But we don't have that extreme separation. So then the question comes actually, kingdom of God is a theocracy, but the problem with theocracy is which theos have you got. And when people hear theocracy, they often think of a big bullying angry God who has given a hotline to him to certain people, call them clergy or whatever, and they will simply tell you God's decisions and you've got to get in line or you have your head chopped off or whatever.

And of course, we know that there are some religions and some regimes that have

behaved and indeed are behaving like that as we speak. The difference with Christianity is that the theos in question who is the theos of the theocracy is the God who is the Father of Jesus Christ, who says, I love you so much. I'm giving my son to die for you.

I love you so much. I'm putting my spirit within you so you can be genuine humans. Now, I like the idea of that theos running the world.

And I notice that that's what the Sermon on the Mount is about when Jesus says, blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, the mourners, the hungry for justice people, peacemakers, et cetera. That's how theocracy works by ordinary, prayerful people being peacemakers, hungry for justice folk, et cetera, et cetera. And of course, that's bitty and messy because the God who God is doesn't send in the tanks.

He sends in that lot the little people who are grieving over the ruin of the world and determined by the spirit to do something about it. Now, I like that theocracy, but you can't translate that theocracy straight onto the statute book because as the early Christians knew, there are many religions and life forms out there. And so the church from the beginning was a new sort of politics which both was and wasn't competing with the existing ones.

I mean, by saying Jesus is Lord, it's quite clear it means Caesar isn't. But when then Caesar decides three or four centuries down the track that so many of his subjects have become Christians, that he wants to get on board with that, that's a very dangerous and risky moment. But the answer isn't, oh no, please go on persecuting us because we'd be so much more authentic to be a beleaguered minority.

The answer has to be, okay, so what's this going to look like? And presumably it means creating a wise and safe environment in which the church can do what it does best, which is looking after the poor, healing the sick, bringing education to everybody, et cetera. Those three things, by the way, looking after the poor, medicine and education have been part of the church's DNA from the beginning. We think that's odd in the Western world because the state does those now and tells the church to get its hands off, but actually that's what we've always been good at.

And it's difficult, isn't it? Because we obviously live in the afterglow of a kind of Christendom in the West, to some extent, where to some extent the state did sort of, because it has been shaped by a Judea Christian worldview, take on those responsibilities and then the church sort of forgot that it was also supposed to be doing that. And some of our, you know, I don't know if this is Doug's position, but that, okay, let's let the state do what it does and let the church do what it's supposed to do. And we shouldn't be too concerned about whether the state does or doesn't reflect Christian values.

I think the question then is, this is going to vary enormously from place to place. I

remember at the Lambeth Conference 10 or 11 years ago, being with some Christians from Myanmar, and they were talking about whether there are one or two members of the ruling elite, the hunter or whatever they were, who were closet Christians. And I remember thinking, oh my goodness, if you live in a country like that, all the questions of church and state and Christian freedom and law and so on look totally different from either, if you live in a muddled country like mine, or if you live in a country like America, which had this big, rather rigid, typically 18th century split, you know, very Thomas Jefferson.

And I want to say we need to become more savvy at navigating our own histories in those moments and saying this is where we are now. What does it mean to be followers of Jesus in this place now? And I don't think for most of us in the Western world, this means we'll retreat to our own thing as church and let the state do its thing because the church has to have a prophetic voice vis-a-vis the state. In John 16, which happened to be my morning reading this morning by Nice Coincidence, Jesus says, when the Spirit comes, the Spirit will convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment and explains that a bit.

And I remember, I mean, I've said this to you before, for years thinking, what a great thing the Spirit holding the world to account. And then it suddenly dawns on me. Jesus doesn't give the Spirit in general terms.

Jesus gives the Spirit to his followers so that his followers can hold up the mirror to power and say sin and righteousness and judgment. And if you want to know what that looks like in John's gospel, you read John 18 and 19, where Jesus confronts Pontius Pilate and argues with him about kingdom and truth and power. And Pilate eventually kills him, but in the great irony of the gospel, that is the victory of the kingdom.

Jesus is King of the Jews because thereafter new creation is launched and Pontius Pilate is yesterday's man, as it were. We only know him because of the creeds of the Christian church. Well, pretty much.

So that is the church's vocation to figure out what it would mean to do vis-a-vis our own governments, be they benign or not benign, what Jesus was doing with Pontius Pilate. One more question here from Doug. If declaring Jesus's Lord means implicitly that Caesar is not, how might Christ followers live today in a world of American and European empires that are somewhat more democratic than the Roman Empire? They may be, but they may not be.

The Romans voted all right, but there was a system and you had to be rather rich and powerful to get in on the system. That does sound rather like what some of us see when we look across the pond at our American friends, that in order to be a senator, you have to be a millionaire, in order to be a president, you have to raise multi-millions. Yes, it's voted for, but there's all sorts of constraints.

And one of the things I pray for regularly is that God will raise up a new generation on both sides of the Atlantic, of wise leaders who will be credible and voteable for in a way which actually of late has not been true in my country, and perhaps some Americans might say has not been entirely true for them either. Thank you for tackling a wide range of questions. On the podcast today, Tom, it's been a pleasure as always, and I hope you've enjoyed listening as well.

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