

# OpenTheo

## #135 My weekend with Queen Elizabeth II

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### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

NT Wright shares his memories of preaching for the Queen while he was the Bishop of Durham. He reflects on her strong Christian faith and how the church can respond in faith and hope at this time of national mourning.

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### Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast Hello and welcome to the podcast that brings you the thought and theology of NT Wright Bible Scholar and former Bishop of Durham. I'm Justin Briely, Head of Theology and Apologetics for Premier Unbelievable. The show is brought to you in partnership with Tom's UK publisher SBCK and NT Wright Online who published his video teaching courses.

Well of course today's edition of the show is very special recorded with Tom just after we heard the news of the death of Queen Elizabeth II. You'll hear his own memories of spending time with the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh and how we can process national moments like these as Christians. There are many more responses to this historic moment available from our website including my conversation with Gavin Aschenden, a former chaplain to the Queen on whether the end of the second Elizabethan age marks the end of Christendom and also an article by Ruth Jackson on Grieving With Hope.

You can find those and more at [premierunbelievable.com](http://premierunbelievable.com) and do sign up to our newsletter there if you want to be kept in form of all the great content that we put out every week. All the links are with today's show. Well I'm joined now by NT Wright, the former Bishop of Durham and a noted historian and Bible scholar and he's joining me well very kindly from your holiday house in the distant parts of Scotland, Tom.

So thank you very much for making time to chat with me today. Obviously we're all sort of getting used to this news that Majesty Queen Elizabeth II has died. Tell us a little bit about your recollection as Tom.

Did you ever have opportunity to meet the Queen, especially I suppose in your role as the Bishop of Durham? Yes I did and before that as well I was a canon of Westminster for three years before I went to Durham and there were various great and great occasions then. For instance the funeral of Princess Margaret and then the funeral of the Queen Mother and on both occasions I was among those who were helping with the service and we met the Queen beforehand and so on. The time I spent most time close with her late Majesty was when I was preaching for her at Sandringham which is where the Queen and the Duke would spend their Christmas holidays and they would invite through January and early February they would invite various bishops to come and stay for the weekend and preach on the Sunday so one would turn up on the Saturday afternoon and then have sort of 36 hours, two nights, one would stay there and that was delightful and the Queen and the Duke both made it so natural and easy to be on for me with them that it was, I had to pinch myself to remind myself this is actually the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh I'm with because actually they were a very similar age slightly younger to my own parents and the sort of things that they would be doing of the Saturday afternoon whether watching the news on the television or playing the card game or something would be really very similar to what I'd be used to in my own home so it was really rather strange and then of course there were various formalities about how things were done but the Queen herself was very relaxed and very together and whether it was welcoming another guest and there were other house guests as well or whether it was conversation over dinner or whether it was taking the corgis out for their last late night outing before bed there she would be walking along the back corridor and saying good night people and so on and just very natural and very relaxed and after the service on the Sunday we had a delightful and rather quirky conversation because I had been asked to preach that weekend and I had checked what the readings were to be for the weekend and so I had

prepared a sermon on the official readings and the person who stood up to read the second lesson read the wrong lesson and it was actually a completely relevant bit of Mark's gospel it should have been Mark 1, 3 to 11 and the person read Mark 4, 3 to 11 which bursts in in the middle of the parable of the sower and doesn't make any of it and the thing is nobody seemed to notice except me as the preacher and I had to I simply went into the pulpit and said this is the Sunday when the church thinks about John the Baptist which is what I prepared to talk about but I explained to her majesty afterwards and she was really quite intrigued by this little glitch which had happened and which nobody else had noticed but she was very friendly and clearly a very devout old fashioned Church of England Christian and I have a strong memory from earlier when I was in Westminster and she was presiding at the opening of General Synod one year and there was a great communion service in Westminster Abbey and she expressed great surprise afterwards because the way communion was distributed was by people simply walking forward in a line and receiving communion and without kneeling down or just carrying on and walking back whereas she and the who perceived communion first and they knelt down in their official seats and it was obviously a surprise to her that now it was quite common for people to receive communion without kneeling down and I had a vision of this is who she was she was somebody who worshipped she was somebody whose whole way of being a Christian was that sort of what we now would think of as an old fashioned Anglican way where actually kneeling was really quite important and and worshiping was was something one did with one's whole body so I have nothing but respect for her quite apart from the extraordinary service I mean to say when you're 25 I'm going to dedicate myself to you my people and then to spend the next 70 years doing it that's that's an extraordinary example which I think very few countries in the world have ever had and certainly we in our national history we've had a very checkered career with Monix coming and going and she has actually played a blinder and that's obviously not controversial everyone I think would say the same so much much to be grateful for to her to God to one another for being part of this whole extraordinary country that we have learned to live in and almost taken for granted but at a time like this it's clear we can't take it for granted we have to say prayers both of gratitude for her and for her successor because he's got a very very difficult act to follow indeed indeed I mean you were probably too young to remember the coronation itself Tom I don't but I do get the sense that she really did regard that as the taking on of a sacred vocation that this was just another ceremony she she has a Christian and I think her Christian faith has only shown the brighter you know in her later years but that she really did regard this as a sacred duty that she had been given in that sense yes that's absolutely right I do remember the coronation because I remember as a small boy being taken to the town square we lived in the far north of England and there was some sort of ceremony and a town cry or whatever and my sister and I were both given coronation Bibles a little chunky King James version and I think we had coronation socks and I think we had a coronation mug and so on so those are things which were designed to stick the event in one's mind and they did stick the event in one's mind but I don't remember

anything of the former king and of course we didn't have a television in those days so we didn't watch the coronation on television one of my aunts went to London and queued for hours in the house in the rain so she was actually there and came home to tell us about it but it wasn't something that impinged in the way it would now but yeah so throughout my life she's just been the constant and there's so many people who were in that same position but that sense of vocation that she had that this was a God given sort of aspect to her life that that seems to have been something that has shone through in her life would you say yes absolutely right and I remember reading that Archbishop Jeffrey Fisher made up specially for her a book of prayers a little book of prayers private prayers for her to say in the weeks coming up to the so the coronation so that she was preparing herself for this in the way that clergy might prepare for ordination and indeed she clearly saw it as a sort of ordination with the anointing and so on and I remember people have stressed that she saw this as a very sacred moment so that the television cameras which were watching the rest of the ceremony were actually not allowed to see that moment it was kind of such an intimate moment of her praying for the equipment of God's Holy Spirit through the anointing to be the sort of person that you know Isaiah 11 talks about where the anointing with the Spirit equips the monarch to be somebody who will be a reconciler a peacemaker and all of those all of those things which the Old Testament emphasizes are the proper characteristics of a monarch and it's wonderful to think that she was prayerfully embracing that as a vocation and as I say much as many many clergy have seen their ordination as commissioning them for a whole lifetime it's not just a job this is who you now are not just a role you slip in and out of and as I say she clearly saw that single-mindedly and went for it throughout the rest of her very long life she obviously had that role of defender of the faith you know the yes in a sense that the governor of the church of England whatever that actually meant in practice obviously in terms of her actual ability to to influence matters in the church of England I suppose is debatable but but nevertheless she she she she was because of her own Christian faith she she she did seem to steer and and to give a sense of permanence and direction I suppose we are going to miss that because there's a sense in which she passes on there's there's a sense in which I suppose we we naturally ask questions about you know is this the end of some particular era of Christendom as the Queen passes on what where does that leave us I don't know if you've any thoughts on that well I think we've been extraordinarily lucky in the church of England to have a monarch who is the titular head of the church which is of course the historical accident going back to Henry VIII nobody before then saw things quite like that but granted she has inhabited that role she's inhabited it extraordinarily effectively at a time in our culture when people more than ever before are looking out for sincerity or its opposite insincerity and when one thinks of some of the people who have been notionally defender of the faith before some of the Kings over the last three or four hundred years one shudders at the thought of them being hailed as defender of the faith or head of the church or whatever but she has seen no if that's the role then I'm going to play it straight down the line and she's done that and as I say at a time when people are very inclined to sneer and poke at any

inconsistencies in public behavior or private behavior of people in public life and so on she has set an example an extraordinary example of how to do it and yeah it's not easy obviously for anyone to follow that and we can't look into the private thoughts of her successor but he is himself a man of faith I don't know him personally I've only met him very fleetingly once or twice but I'm sure he will see his mother's example as something remarkable to live up to and I think he'll give it his best shot hmm and I suppose for those who are sort of coming to terms with the end of a very significant reign the end of something that in a sense granted a sense of permanence and stability in many ways to British culture and indeed globally how do we move forward what are the prayers that you will be praying and encouraging others to pray as we kind of move into a new era without Queen Elizabeth at the forefront of things well from the very beginning the church has always encouraged one another to pray for monarchs and all who are in positions of responsibility and authority that's in in one of the pastoral letters Paul urges because whatever regime you're living under it is appropriate to pray for them because and we must never forget this in Judaism and in early Christianity at least there is a strong sense of of the goodness of God's creation which includes God's intention that his world be ruled wisely by wise human beings and that is something one can pray for whatever the faith or lack thereof that the particular human beings may have you know we've had great leaders of the past I think of Winston Churchill who saw himself as like a buttress supporting the church from the outside rather than the inside and probably himself being some kind of a dais rather than a Trinitarian Christian but one could still and people did pray for him for wisdom in his hour of great extraordinary responsibility so there there is I think we're not very used to thinking this one through in the Western world particularly within modern democracies where prime ministers or presidents come and go and so on but that is a primary task of all Christian people to pray for the rulers of the nations of the world and local government as well wherever they may be and whatever the actual beliefs of the people for whom they are thus praying because again and again in the Bible of course God's sovereignty over all people is demonstrated even though it doesn't always work out the way we might like so when you actually have had somebody who is explicitly and quite genuinely signed up for the full Christian faith and she was she made no secret of that obviously in her Christmas broadcasts we look back times when she was very clear about her allegiance to Jesus and her desire that the peace and harmony which Jesus came to bring should become a reality in her people and throughout the world you know when we look back on that we say yes would that all rulers or monarchs were thus minded and of course when you have a constitutional monarchy and then a parliamentary democracy sitting as it were underneath it that is a particular balance which we have maintained now for many years it seems more or less to work it isn't the only way to do wise government but there's all sorts of reasons to suppose that it's a way which seems to suit our rather strange unwritten constitution and so on so we should all be praying for wisdom not only for King Charles as he now is but for all those who advise him and for those who serve under him all the way down through Parliament to the local governments under which we all live.

In a moment I will ask you to pray to that effect Tom but just one last question I suppose as many people now sort of suddenly come to terms with this there will be a lot of opportunity for churches to be opening their doors, cathedrals and so on to give space for people to reflect to pay their respects condolences I'm sure the funeral itself will be an important occasion for that as well. In the sense that the church especially the institutional church the Church of England comes into its own very often in these important moments of national mourning and these moments so what's your hope as we try to make sense of this for people and often they bump up against a sense of eternity and the sacred and that sort of thing in these moments what can the church be doing what can we be doing to encourage individuals as they process this themselves? Yes I think there's the wider picture that the church should always be reminding people of the overall sovereignty of God the Creator who wants his world to be wisely ordered and so as we give thanks for the wise ordering of our society through some turbulent times over the last 70 years we pray that similarly with whatever transition is now appropriate we will be able to go forward with that same spirit and that same sense of national coherence under wise and faithful leadership and we will pray for Charles particularly and for his advisors that that may be so but secondly I remember many of Christmas broadcasts where she was very explicit about Christmas being a time of celebrating Jesus and Jesus being the one that she has done her best to follow and believe in and serve throughout her life and I think it would be a lovely thing if churches could find ways of collecting the clips of those broadcasts where she's said that kind of thing and using those as a way of actually preaching the gospel and saying this is who Jesus was and is and will be and this is what it looks like to sign on to follow him with your whole life I think then her legacy could be an extraordinary ongoing one of a challenge to personal faith and allegiance hmm finally Tom thank you for the time you've given us perhaps you could just pray for for the Queen for the family for the country at this moment father we thank you for Queen Elizabeth the second we thank you for her life her dedication her example of following Jesus faithfully through to the end we pray now that she may rest in peace and rise in glory in the final new creation which you have promised we pray for Charles and all those who advise him and for the whole royal family that throughout this time of mourning they may know your presence your love and your peace and for our country as we move through this extraordinary transition that we may find faithful ways forward into a new day of more fidelity more devotion and more service to one another and to you we pray in Jesus name Amen Amen thank you so much for joining me today Tom thanks Justin good to see you as always

[Music] thank you for being with us on today's special show and Tom will return soon with more of your questions in the normal format of the program in the meantime the next couple of weeks we'll be bringing you some bonus material on the podcast always at the usual landing time every Thursday do feel free to send in your thoughts on the passing of the Queen you can reach me by [unbelievable@premier.org.uk](mailto:unbelievable@premier.org.uk) that's the email address but if you want to submit a question for the show you do need to register at our

website and we'll send you the link to ask the question that's premierunbelievable.com where you can also find a lot more content reflecting on this historic moment of the Queen's death and as Prince Charles becomes King Charles the third and out thanks for being with us and see you soon

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[Music] [ Silence ]