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#195 Pain and suffering Part 1 (Replay)

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

From the archives: Tom shares his thoughts on the difficult questions listeners have around issues such as dementia, death, the global pandemic and whether God himself suffers. NT Wright speaking with Miroslaf Volf on weeping, waiting and working with God in the pandemic <https://faith.yale.edu/media/n-t-wright-on-weeping-waiting-and-working-with-god-in-the-pandemic> • 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/training> • Support us in the USA: <http://www.premierinsight.org/unbelievableshow> • Support us in the rest of the world: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/donate>

Transcript

Thank you for joining us on this Ask NT Wright Anything podcast today. Before we bid in the programme, I want to be sure that you don't miss out on a comforting free resource designed to help those dealing with pain and hurt. The question of why God allows suffering is one of life's greatest theological puzzles.

Christians and non-believers alike have wondered, often in Knight's most painful moments, why doesn't God always heal? And while there are no easy answers, God's words says so much about both our shoes. 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 God. 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 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. Welcome back to today's podcast and we've got a couple of episodes coming up the first today on the issue of suffering.

We'll try and tackle some of the more pastoral questions next time. And this comes through so often in different ways. We've probably done two, three or four even episodes really now, Tom, in the podcast series that deal with issues around pain and suffering, because it's just a reality in people's life and it comes in all shapes and forms.

This first question that we're going to hear from Dave in Ottawa is on the subject of Alzheimer's. I don't know though if you've seen the video that was doing the rounds towards the end of the year where it's extraordinarily sort of montage really of an elderly woman. I would begin to remember the moves and physically, almost gracefully, from the depths of herself somehow, which had obviously forgotten so much physically, this was awoken and contrasted that against images of a ballerina doing that dance.

And very moving, seems to trigger a lot of people seem to resonate with that. We've on our unbelievable blog wrote something likening it to those words of Paul on this present body and that future body we all have. There's something almost that resonates with that about that we don't really believe this is the end, that somehow we will dance again.

I don't know what your reactions were if you've seen that video. Yes, I just thought I didn't actually watch the whole thing, but somebody showed me a bit of it and I thought, wow, and then I read in the paper or something about it as well. It is a beautiful thing, a very moving thing, and it resonates with what I've heard from people who've worked closely with Alzheimer's sufferers or similar sufferers, about the things that do remain, and clearly music is really, really important, pretty deep down as one of those things.

A dear friend whose photograph I can see as I look here was Bishop of Litchfield, Keith Sutton when I was Dean of Litchfield, I knew him well. And Keith's wife, Jeannie, was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's when she was in her 50s. And Keith kept her at home, he didn't put her in a care home, he had day and night carers come in, he carried on his job as a busy bishop and would spend all the spare time he could with her.

And he said, it was very moving, that they would sometimes watch the television program together where people were singing hymns, and even though Jeannie, his wife didn't even know who he was, and was completely incoherent the rest of the time, she would sing along with the hymns, that they were still absolutely in her mind and other similar things, that the music just brought out something which was still there, even though you mightn't have guessed it until that happened. And I think that's such a mystery, we just don't know very much about it. I mean, Dave's question, Dave from Ottawa, he says something about that maybe he will one day forget the Lord, but I know he won't forget the Lord.

Well, let's read Dave's question. I haven't referenced it properly yet. But it was his question that made me think of that.

No, absolutely. Here is Dave's question, says I'm so blessed to be listening to the

podcast over the years, thank you Dave. A little while ago I was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's, it was not so much a surprise to me as I'm the ninth member on my mother's side to be diagnosed.

I know I will someday forget the Lord, but I know he will never forget me. What would you like to say to the many people in the world with this particular disability which some have said to be in many ways a theological disease? Yeah, I've not heard that phrase of theological disease before, but I assume that it means that it raises the theological question that if somebody is no longer able to function mentally and with their mind and emotions working together, has something happened to them as a human being. And I think I want to say, yes, something has happened to them as a human being, but I don't think it's a complete denial.

I mean, there are so many things that happen to us as human beings which seem a denial of the person that we once were when we were in our twenties or thirties or whatever it might be. And yet in other respects, maybe we are meant to be more, more image bearing, more capable of bearing God's image than we were before. I don't know.

I think what I want to say here is that we don't know whether Dave, whether you and others like you will forget the Lord. Just like we can't tell whether that ballerina had actually forgotten the moves until they played the music and hear her body remembered. And likewise, my friends, severely stricken wife, who could remember all the words to the hymns because the music just carried those memories.

And I've known other elderly people whose minds were in other respects failing, who could still recite the poems that they'd learned when they were seven or eight or nine at school and so on. So it's a mystery. And I'm also struck by an elderly priest.

I remember hearing about from a friend of his who was beginning to find that in the same way his mind was going. And his response was that for many years he had prayed to the Lord, take my life, take my heart, take my mind. And he said, if now he wants to take my mind, then that's up to him.

And there's a sense of an appropriate resignation rather than Dylan Thomas is raging against the dying of the light and so on. But there is also, of course, the sure and certain hope of the resurrection from the dead. Yes, of course, our bodies will crumble and decay.

Our minds will crumble and decay. Sometimes the one happens in advance of the other. But the whole Christian hope is not based on, let's hope we can make it to 80 or 85 or 90, while we still got all our faculties, wouldn't that be nice, perhaps.

But rather that God has a new body, a new mind, a risen self ready for us so that in the new creation, that's who we will be. And that's what we have to work towards all the

time, even though that's really, really tough. And my heart goes out today because knowing enough already to know what it's likely going to be like must be very seriously worrying.

It's like sort of facing a slow moving car crash and not being able to do anything about it. And so I shall pray for David and others like him. And I think that equally there's that sense isn't there for those who care for relatives with dementia, Alzheimer's and so on.

Yeah. That to some extent, you know, you lose the person to some extent. Yeah.

But there's still remnants there of that person's personality and memory and everything else. And it is just a very confusing, difficult time. It's a very gray area of humanity, isn't it, at that point? Absolutely.

And I think, yes, that calls for resources and reserves of emotional ability to give and give. And again, another reference, the Irish poet, Michael O'Sheel, when his late wife, breed, was dying, started off with Parkinson's, but then it went into some form of dementia. And Michal wrote that amazing book of poems, which he'd had as a sort of a diary of watching over her until she was no longer able to be at home and was in a care home around the corner.

I think it's called One Crimson Thread. And you just feel, I didn't know I was going to be called upon to love and love and love. To love this person who doesn't even seem to know me anymore.

But that seems to be what we are called to do. And that's tough. And yeah, maybe many of us have got to think about that sort of thing in advance because we may well be called upon to do it.

And those who do, like my friend Keith Sutton and like Michal, are a shining example to the rest of us. That's what your marriage vows actually meant. Yes.

The better of who works for Richard for poor in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish to death to us part. And I don't mean to be judgmental in any way to those who perhaps do go in this direction. But I think there's a sadness I find in the fact that this, the reality of this as an increasing reality among the elderly population has led to people choosing to end their lives, choosing to go down the route of euthanasia and so on.

Because somehow they say, well, I wouldn't be me anymore. But for me, that is something sad because it almost, it means that if I cannot be this, then it is not worth living anymore. And for me, that almost idolatizes that aspect of who you are, that if I cannot be this, if I cannot be in command in this way any longer, I don't want this life.

Quite. I think I share exactly what you said that I don't want to be judgmental and say, oh, how silly, you should never be like that because I haven't faced that. At the same

time, I would very firmly adhere to the long term Jewish and Christian teaching, which is that life is a gift from God and it's God's business, what he does with it and when and so on.

Of course, the fact that we've now got much superior medical science than we had two, three hundred years ago means that people are living longer. And this is more of a problem for more people more of the time than it used to be, people who would have died quite young in days gone by simply are living longer and facing these problems. But I think partly just something I'm with you on this is a very deep reaction against.

But also when you start to think of the effects on the rest of the family, that the children and grandchildren saying, well, of course, granny decided dot dot dot. And I think the long term effects of potential guilt there, should they have been glad? Should they not have been glad? It gets us into some very murky areas and I don't think we ought to go there. I would like to take just a moment to remind you that it's listeners like you who make programs like this one today possible through your financial support.

In fact, your kid today is so important that we would like to say thanks for your gift by sending you a copy of the e-book, *Is God Dead, Faith, Culture and the Modern World*. It's a powerful resource that unpacks where today's generations are turning in an increasingly post Christian society. And how you can stand strong in your faith, igniting a renaissance of belief.

To give your gift or request your copy, simply visit premierinsight.org slash N T right. Once again, that's premierinsight.org slash N T right. Thank you for your generosity and partnership, which are vital to keep this program coming to you and thousands of other listeners.

Enjoy the rest of your episode. Let's get another sort of theological question in here. Lana in California asks, Is suffering and pain a natural consequence of sin, like stepping out of a safe terrain into a dangerous terrain, or is God actively inflicting the pain? Obviously, I'm much more comfortable thinking of it as the former, but reading passages like Genesis 3 in which God tells Eve, I will make your pains in childbearing very severe.

Leave me grappling and anxious about the character of God would love to hear your thoughts on this time. Yeah, I mean, there are many things in scripture where words are put into God's mouth, which do seem almost anthropomorphized. This is what I'm going to do, et cetera, et cetera.

And when we stand back, we say, well, God made this world in a mysterious and beautiful way, but it was a world which had many things in it, which he then wanted his human creatures to take forward as a project, rather than having it simply as a tableau. And that there are times like that when I would much more be inclined to say what Lana says about, like stepping out of a safe terrain into dangerous terrain, that, well, you have

gone to this place. And God is not going to say, Oh, well, we'll stop creation working at that point in order to make it less painful for you or something.

Like, if I drive round a sharp bend at 90 miles an hour, I can't expect God to say, Oh, we'll just stop the laws of physics for a moment to stop you getting into trouble there. It's going to be more complicated than that, but I think I would want to go some way down that line. Because the character of God, as we know in scripture, can't be just read off one sentence or another here or there.

And then there's this one that I'm going to talk about in the book of Jesus, which ultimately meet in the person of Jesus. And I argued this in my little book on the pandemic that we see on the one hand, God saying, if you do this and this and this, I will punish you for that. And on the other hand, people like Job suffering terrible things and people saying, Oh, God's punishing you.

And it's quite clear from the way the book is set up that that's not the case at all. How do those two go together? The answer is they only go together when we see them meeting in the cross of Jesus where God is punishing sin, but where it is also an innocent sufferer saying, My God, why did you abandon me? And so many of these things, what is God doing in the world? The first and last Christian answer should be, God is being Jesus in the world. Now, let's work it out around that.

And that doesn't mean, Oh, well, that's all right, then there won't ever be any pain. No, far from it, Jesus said, take up the cross and follow me. We live in a dangerous and painful world, and God is coming to our midst not to magically take the pain away, but to share and bear the pain of the world and to ask us to join him in that pilgrimage towards the new creation, which will involve us as well in suffering.

Not because God wants to make life nasty for us, but because the world as it has become is a nasty place. And if we're Jesus people, we are to be part of those who share that pain so that the world may be redeemed. And that is written right across the New Testament, whether it's in Mark or in Romans or 1 Peter or Revelation, that that is how it's seen.

A lot of people have read the book, God and the pandemic, but of course you sort of very briefly spelled out some of your thoughts quite early on in the pandemic in an article for Time magazine that was shared quite widely. And did generate quite a bit of controversy as well as people read that. Obviously, you can't say everything you necessarily want to say in the word limit that you're given there, but Joshua Hamilton in Pennsylvania says I appreciated your article in Time magazine about God.

Lamenting with us through this time of pandemic. Of course, it was met with criticism specifically that it presented God as possible rather than impossible. I didn't not get that take rather than you were demonstrating that God, despite his impossibility can and

does enter into our grief with the intention of redeeming these moments and reconciling people to himself through them.

So I wonder if you could present your views on God's impossibility and help explain that article in light of those views. And he very much looks forward to addressing that. So perhaps just to define these terms for those who are maybe scratching their heads or haven't read that Time magazine article.

What do we mean by God being possible versus impossible? Yes, possibility comes from the Latin *Pasio*, which is about suffering. And there's a technical problem here because suffering can be seen in terms of, oh, this is very painful, or it can be seen in the more technical sense of something being done to me as opposed to me doing something. So I am suffering the effects of this light, even though it's not causing me pain.

I am the passive partner when it comes to me and this light shining on me or whatever. So I think part of the problem in the early church was with people who believed that if God is God in any meaningful sense, God must always be the active one, always be the one who is giving out, who is pouring out of himself, et cetera. And the idea that God could be passive, whether in that general sense, or less alone in the sense of actually suffering would seem like a contradiction in terms.

Now, into that question of a classical view of a God who couldn't possibly be other than the initiator, the actor, the one who initiates everything, into that there comes the figure of Jesus. And the Jesus who weeps in Gethsemane, the Jesus who in John 11 weeps at the tomb of his friend, the Jesus who dies on the cross. And in Matthew and Mark shouts out, my God, why did you abandon me? Quote from Psalm 22.

How do you do Christology and an impassable God? And this has been a huge topic of theological conversation over the last generation, particularly associated with Jürgen Moltmann, the great German scholar who is astonishingly still alive and lecturing in his mid 90s now. My son and I went to see him in Westminster Abbey and hop that long ago, bless him. And many people have found particularly after the experience of all the suffering of the 20th century and two world wars and Moltmann was a prisoner of war in the Second World War, et cetera.

The idea of an impassable God somehow away from the process beckoning us to come and join him in his impassibility or whatever just doesn't cut it. That just doesn't do what the Christian gospel ought to do. Whereas the idea of a God who in the person of Jesus says, I am with you in trouble.

I am taking it upon myself, and I'm going to bring you through this. That actually sounds more like the gospel as we read it in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and Paul. So then you've got the question of a kind of a classical theology which says you can't have a God who suffers versus a Trinitarian classical Christ theology, which says that there is one

God and only one God and Jesus himself is the second person of the Trinity.

And the Holy Spirit is the third person in that Trinity, which sends us to passages like, and this is where I was working from, like Romans eight, where in Romans eight, the whole creation is groaning in travail. Fine. We know that.

We know about earthquakes. We know about wars and pandemics and so on. That's always gone on.

This should not be a surprise. Where should we be in that? And it isn't the case that the church should be above it and should be looking down from a great height saying, well, we're all right because we know God so we're not involved in that. No, the church is right in the middle of it as historically has always been the case.

The church pastorally and practically involved. We ourselves, Paul says, who have the first fruits of the spirit, we groan within ourselves as we await our adoption as children, the redemption of our bodies. But then where is God? And the answer is God the spirit is groaning within us with inarticulate groanings, verse 26.

And so if you have any Trinitarian theology at all, and Paul obviously does in Romans eight, you have to say God the spirit is groaning inarticulately within us within the pain of the world. And then verse 27, the one who searches the hearts, that is God the Father knows what is the mind of the spirit because the spirit intercedes for God's people according to God's will. That is an extraordinary picture of the unity of God holding together the pain of the world and the pain of the church as well.

And then Paul says this shapes us according to the pattern of Christ that he might be the first born in a large family. In other words, in the mystery of the Trinity, you can talk about the ultimate sovereignty and impassibility of God if you want. But you must never break the link between the Father and the spirit shaping us according to the pattern of the Son, the Son who cried out, my God, why did you abandon me? Now, I haven't answered the question.

What I've done is to put it back into its biblical context and suggest that urgently that's what we should do. And especially with John's gospel as well. In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God and the word wept at the tomb of his friend in Bethany in John 11.

Jesus didn't do the weeping insofar as he was human. John would say he did the weeping insofar as he was God. And I would say just go figure, take it from there and let's rethink and re-pray our vision of God accordingly.

Wow. Well, I can recommend highly because it helped me to think through this issue. When you had a great conversation with Miraslav Volf on his podcast for the life of the world, and that will be in the archive.

I'll try and make sure to link to it from today's show. I've forgotten that. You had a really great conversation with him about you with the book God and the pandemic, but it was in light of that time article as well for which you'd come under some criticism.

But yes, lament that was really helpful. Final question then, just for today's episode. And this sort of encapsulates some of this stuff we've already been talking about, but again, Melissa again out in California says that I had a health problem for many years.

And I believe God had compassion for the pain I was experiencing. Now, I understand suffering to be an unavoidable aspect of life, but he did heal me through diagnosis and treatment, and I consider this a gift from God. Now, while I understand the danger to view a relationship with Jesus transactionally, I also see a tendency to glorify suffering, which feels damaging to those actually suffering.

Doesn't new creation mean poverty and pain are diminished, which would then suggest that it is ultimately God's will. There is health and wealth as crude as that may sound for all people. Could you speak into this? So, yes, I suppose Melissa doesn't want us to lose the fact that she did believe God does do good things for people that healing happens, even prosperity sometimes, you know, whatever, and that we shouldn't wallow necessarily in a view that suffering is our lot and we just have to bear it as best we can and see God's purposes through it somehow.

Yes, at so many points, it's vital to keep a balance in all of this, isn't it? And Melissa, I'm totally with you. I do believe God answers prayers for healings, sometimes through the skilled attention of the medical professionals, and sometimes despite the fact that they say there's nothing more we can do. And I know people who are alive today having been given up by the doctors as being completely hopeless and about to die and people who are praying and that person is still alive.

Equally, I said in a sermon recently, I had two friends who are both diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in the summer of 2015. Both of them were part of church fellowships that were praying for them. Both of them had expert medical care.

One of them was dead within six months, and the other one was amazingly healed and is alive today. And in fact, I'm going to be, I hope, talking to him on the phone in the next day or two. I don't understand why that happens.

I do not have a theory to explain it. I merely see in the Bible and in real life that God can and does heal people some of the time for purposes best known to himself and other times this just doesn't happen. My parade example is Acts 12, where at the beginning of Acts 12, Herod has James the brother of John killed with the sword, and he's going to do the same to Peter, but the church is praying and Peter gets out of jail free and continues to have a career as a traveling missionary, etc.

And yes, he dies a pretty nasty death at the end, according to legend, but so what was going on there? If I was James's mother, I wouldn't like Acts 12. I would say, well, we were praying for James as well. Why didn't God rescue him? And that is part of the mystery.

And it's because of that, that there is simultaneously in the church, this sense that, yes, suffering happens, it will happen to all of us in one form or another, emotional, physical, mental, spiritual, political, social, whatever, suffering is going to happen. But we don't wallow in it. We lament, which is a way of saying we don't understand what's going on.

It doesn't mean we've got the solution. But then the lament will sometimes perhaps quite often lead to a prayer for God to rescue us from that moment and to restore us to health and or wealth as it may be. Although that tends to be a kind of a lure.

And I think Melissa is aware of that phrase, health and wealth being a bit of a carrot that's dangled in front of us as though we were to strain forward for that, forgetting that for most of the world's history and for most Christians throughout history, health has been sporadic and brief. The death rate has been in people's 20s and 30s, usually at the most. And wealth has been very limited to put it mildly for most of history.

And to this day, only a few people in the world are seriously wealthy and so on and so on. We're all going to suffer so what? Because the Kingdom of God is about God being with us in that in order to bring signs of new creation. And it's that business of the signposts of new creation that I think we ought to be emphasizing more and more.

And the answering of prayer for healing would certainly be among those signposts, even if that doesn't happen as often as we might like. But there are many other prayers as well, which when God answers them, this is a sign that ever since the resurrection of Jesus new creation has been pushing up green shoots. And one day that new creation will happen.

And our task is to be signpost makers for that future, even if in the nature of the case, that is going to be painful in some ways in ways that we don't expect and we certainly won't like. So we rejoice with you, Melissa, in your healing. And we pray that we'll be a signpost for others towards that ultimate healing and reconciliation with God.

But thank you so much for all the questions. We've got questions of a pastoral nature, but in a similar area around issues of suffering and so on that we'll do on the next podcast. But for now, Tom, thank you very much again.

Thank you. Good to be with you again. Did you know the greatest story is that once in Royal David City, the Virgin Mary had a baby boy and it was all holy night.

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