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#154 Tom answers Qs on universalism, hell and salvation

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

In an extended edition of the show originally broadcast on the Unbelievable? podcast, Justin asks a variety of listener questions on dispensationalism, John's gospel, inerrancy, salvation, hell, universalism and Tom's favourite books, music and much more... First broadcast in 2016.

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Transcript

[Music] The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

[Music] Hello, glad you could be with us for the show that brings you the thought and theology of NT Wright. Tom, of course, senior research fellow at Wickliffe Hall Oxford University and a celebrated theologian and historian.

I'm Justin Briley, head of apologetics and theology for Premier Unbelievable. And today you'll be hearing an extended edition of the show, originally broadcast on the Unbelievable podcast, the other show I run, in which I put a variety of listener questions on dispensationalism, John's Gospel, Inerrancy, Salvation Hell, Universalism, and Tom's favourite books, music and much more to Tom. This was first broadcast actually in 2016,

and this was very much a show that set the template for what would become The Ask NTY Anything podcast a couple of years later.

I should say we're lining up some fresh recordings with Tom very soon, so now is a good time to get subscribed to our newsletter at PremierUnbelievable.com. That means you'll receive the link to ask a question of Tom as well, plus loads of bonus content. We've got tons of eBooks, bonus videos and all kinds of things you'll get when you subscribe at premierunbelievable.com. For now, here's the questions. So we've got a lot of scholarly questions here, Tom.

Plus a few just general interest questions as well, so we'll see what we can get to in the course of the programme. I'm going to save the ones that came in on Atonement Theology for next week, so we'll be doing that in some ways. Here's one maybe to start us off with.

Ed Atkinson is a former Christian who's been on the show a few times and next Christian, but since he's deconverted, he's had all sorts of questions around looking into the evidence for the resurrection and that kind of thing. He sent me, and I'll have to read it out probably somewhat in full to give you the picture, but he wants to know about how much Paul knew about Jesus' ministry and how much he was aware of the sayings and teaching of Jesus. Ed says, "Tom, I'm confused by Paul concerning what he knew regarding Jesus and the gospel and how he knew it." It's often noted how little Paul seemed to know or was interested in telling about Jesus of Nazareth's ministry in Galilee, Jerusalem.

The only direct quote of Jesus' words was the Eucharist, and that seems so strange when Paul loved to quote, apparently there are over 180 Old Testament quotes in Paul's writing, about seven Christian creed or hymn quotes and two Roman poetry quotes. So why essentially is the question, do we not hear more in Paul's writings of Jesus' sayings, his teachings, his life and so on? And he's got other things to say and I could bring those in as we can. Yeah, it's a good question and people have been hacking away at this one for a long time because as soon as you start to read the New Testament, the point that he makes is obvious that we don't have from Paul lengthy quotes from Jesus.

In the way that for instance we do in the letter of James. James doesn't say, as Jesus said, but when we line up James, particularly with the Gospel of Matthew, we can see that quite a lot of things echo with the Sermon on the Mount and so on. I think part of our problem here is that we tend to assume that Jesus is a teacher who is teaching a new way of truth or something, and that Paul also is a teacher who is teaching Jesus' new way of truth.

And actually their situations are much more different than that. When we go back to Jesus, we find that he is announcing something like somebody out on the street with a loud halo saying, "This is happening right now, you've better get on board." And what

he's announcing is that this is the time for God to become king, and this is a very Israel specific message. This is, "I'm only sent at the moment to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." And it's about the way in which the time is fulfilled, and they all knew what that meant, the time for God to do the new thing, the new exodus, the great act of deliverance, what it, and people were puzzled what it's going to be.

But it all seems to focus for Jesus followers at the time on Jesus being Messiah, and then Jesus tries to explain that what this Messiah has to do is he's got to give his life as a ransom for many, which was not part of the game plan. What Jesus is doing is a very direct at one level, and then a very complex and puzzling thing at another level. Paul is doing something completely different.

Paul is out there in the wider non-Jewish world, and Paul is saying to the wider Jewish world, "There is a new Lord." This is in a world where Caesar was Lord, and were the other religious lords and so on. And who is this Lord? It's somebody called Jesus, who is Israel's Messiah, and he's died, and he's been raised from the dead. And this is the focal point of his message.

And it is as though Paul has picked up all the stuff about what Jesus was doing and rolled it into a ball called Messiah, because this is the Messiah. And now we see everything backwards, as it were, in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection. And so Paul is announcing to the world at large that there is a new Lord.

If Paul had said the kingdom of God is at hand, A) that wouldn't amend anything because people in Athens or Philippi or whatever weren't expecting the kingdom of God in the way that Jews were. And B) if Paul had said the kingdom of God is at hand like Jesus had done, that would mean that he didn't believe Jesus had really done it. In other words, I've often used this example, Jesus is like the composer who is writing the symphony, and Paul is like the conductor who is teaching musicians in different towns to play it.

And you don't then recompose the symphony. If you're loyal, you get on. It's a different activity.

So that there is more to say, but that's where I would start to look at the historical difference between what they were doing. Okay, I understand that. So there's a different thing that Paul is doing.

He's kind of taking what Jesus started and continuing in his context. I mean, I have heard, and I don't know if this is the motivation that Ed's coming from here, but even Jesus' mythicists claim, well, we've got all this content in the gospels, but Paul partly mentions any of the other things. And Paul partly mentions any of it.

Something doesn't stack up here. But you're saying that's not the best. There's all sorts of interesting points about that.

The people have said, well, clearly the gospels reflect a much later time, and these are later controversies read back into the ministry of Jesus. In fact, there are so many counter examples of which, perhaps the obvious one is, we know that two of the biggest things that Paul himself had to deal with, one was the question of circumcision. Do people have to get circumcised when they come into this movement from non-Jewish backgrounds? Second, the question of spiritual gifts, how does that work? How do you tell the truth from the counterfeit, et cetera, et cetera? It's remarkable that in the gospels, despite all the welter of other traditions, there is not one mention of either of those things.

There are lots of other things as well. You have to say, if the gospels were made up by people trying to address their own later issues on the basis of mythical imaginings about Jesus, they would surely have had something about that. Perhaps the most important is that when Paul already summarizes the good news in 1 Corinthians 15, he talks about Jesus being crucified, being raised from the dead, and being seen.

He gives a list of the people who saw him. Who's missing from that list? It's the women. He rattles through C. Fass, James, et cetera, et cetera.

That's an interesting point. Just quickly, in a finding of finishing some of what Ed also mentioned here, he said, given this, according to Ed, he said, "If you were making up stories post Paul about the resurrection, you would never have had Mary Magdalene front and center. These must be earlier stories, even if they're written down later." Are we to assume Paul's main understanding of Jesus was from direct revelation? Yes, no.

It depends on me by direct revelation. Paul said he had seen the risen Jesus, and it's very odd. He knew it was odd, but describes it being odd, but he had actually seen Jesus.

It wasn't a vision of spiritual imagining. The thing that he fastens on to is the resurrection of the crucified one who was and is Israel's Messiah. It definitely goes back.

You can't imagine, if you're somebody like Saul of Tarsus, that the word Messiah could mean some imaginary person. This must be a human being in the line of David who has done certain things, et cetera. And for Paul, the crucial thing is, has he or has he not fought the great battle through which the great enemy is overthrown? And for Paul it's not Rome, it's the dark power that stood behind Rome.

Cracking starts to today's programme. We're asking Nt. Write anything.

I asked Nt. Write anything I said on my Facebook, Twitter, and on a show a few weeks ago, and you have been writing your thoughts in. So we're going to go through a lot more questions in the course of today's programme.

I understand your answers are going to be somewhat contained. But here's another huge issue. Austin Dunn wrote in to say, "How would you define biblical inerrancy? And how

important would it be for the church to communicate this doctrine to the world in this day and age?" I personally wouldn't want to define something called biblical inerrancy.

That is not itself taught in that fashion in the Bible itself. So there's a systematic oddity about it in that if the Bible really is inerrant, then the idea of biblical inerrancy is out of the window because the Bible itself does not teach. It's own inerrancy.

That is not to say that the Bible actually discusses itself particularly at all. I mean, why would it like that? There are little inner biblical hints. But the idea of inerrancy comes out of the rationalist movement of the, well, late 18th, early 19th century as it was picked up by then Christian rationalists at the end of the 19th and early 20th century who were so appalled by the way that sort of atheist rationalism was behaving and saying, "You can't believe this.

You can't believe that." That they went back and said, "No, we have the Bible and that is inerrant." And of course, what they were doing was piggybacking on a much older view from the Reformation, that the authority of God is vested in scripture rather than simply tradition or simply reason. And so what they're saying is the Bible is authoritative and then because of the rationalist philosophical framework that they'd inherited in the 19th century, the way that they wanted to say it was authoritative, was it much more than a word? That's a narrative. Was it must be inerrant? And actually, that's a backwater.

That's a dead end street. So you think that things like the Chicago statement on biblical inerrancy and so on are somewhat misguided ventures? Yeah, I mean, the trouble is it's like sort of having to stop beating your wife, whichever answer you give is going to be a bad answer. But if you say, "Is the Bible inerrant?" Either yes or no, then I want to say, hang on, why are we asking that question? It's a kind of a false search for the wrong kind of security.

I believe that we have the Bible God wanted us to have. And if you start talking about inerrancy, you get into all sorts of literal metaphorical discussions which I have discovered over the years, these are dead ends. They don't get you in there.

And it can turn into a bit of a witch hunt I find. It can turn into a source of things. Exactly it can.

And the real problem is asking those questions actually is a displacement activity to stop people saying, "What is the Bible actually saying?" There's lots of people who talk about inerrancy of scripture who don't actually stop to consider, "What a Matthew, Mark and Luke and John telling us?" And they're telling us that this was the time when God became king and they often just ignore that. What sort of word would you use to describe? Would you say you said authoritative? I would say delegated authority. I mean, when Jesus, the risen Jesus in Matthew 28 talks about authority, he doesn't say all authority and heaven and on earth is given to the books you chaps are going to go off and write.

He says it's all given to me. And so if we say that the Bible is authoritative, then the Bible itself says this must mean something more complicated. It's about God giving Jesus authority and Jesus by his spirit equipping people to write things which would enable them to do what God wants them.

So this is the thing. If you say inerrant, you end up with, "Have I or have I not?" God, a set of truths in my head, which will then sort of sit there as a safe place, instead of which what the Bible is given for is to equip the church to be the body of Christ in and for the world. It's an active dynamic authority.

Great stuff. Let's turn to Facebook. Daniel Paterson writes in from Australia.

It says, "I've spoken a bit with Tom on a related topic before. Perhaps he's been to one of your sessions. You've been to Australia before? A couple of times." There you go.

Probably then. But I'm interested to hear him speak on the synoptics/John question. So the synoptics being Matthew Mark, Luke in the gospels, John sort of having a bit of different flavour to it.

Now, why is there such a difference in content? John being 90% unique, especially in the identity claims of Jesus. How would you account for this? And what tack do you take in establishing the historical reliability of John's gospel? Now, there have been other comments along these lines. This is, I think, an area that people are also interested in.

People like Paul Williams, who's a Muslim, writing in to say, "Is it at all likely that the historical Jesus actually said the great? I am statements in the gospel of John." Okay, so another whole show worthy question, brain world answer. There's enough there's enough there for an entire terms worth seminars at the university. Yeah, I have to say, I'm not a Johannine expert.

I know people who are and I revere them, but I have I love John and I read it and preach on it and write about it as much as I can. But it's not my primary field. However, let me just say, there's a new book just out by Richard Hayes, H.A.Y.S. former Dean of Duke Divinity School, who's just made a remarkable recovery, by the way, from pancreatic cancer, which most people don't recover from.

And this last year has been an extraordinary journey for him. But this book is called "Eckers of Scripture in the Gospels." And he tracks the way that Matthew and Mark and Luke and John all use Israel's scriptures, what we've come to call the Old Testament. And the way in which particularly the portrait of Jesus in all four Gospels, in the way that it draws down on many ideas and themes from the Old Testament, shows Jesus to be the personal embodiment of Israel's God.

In other words, Matthew, Mark and Luke, as well as John, have what is known in the trade as a high Christology, if you like, a view of Jesus as the incarnation, the embodiment of

the one God of Israel. Now, this is a shock when Richard's book really lands in terms of seminars and university courses. There's going to be an awful lot of people tearing up old lecture notes and rewriting textbooks and so on.

People will resist it because there's all sorts of vested interests that want to say, no, no, no, the idea of Jesus as God is a much later idea. But once we get used to what Richard is teaching us, then I think we find our way back past the old 18th century world, which is where a lot of our questions come from, which had, a dayist view of a high and dry God a long way away, so that if you said Jesus is somehow divine, you had this idea of Jesus as a strange spaceman who's come from a long way away. And instead of that, you get a much more biblical idea of God and the world being strangely symbiotic, no, it's probably the wrong word, but there being something about Heaven and Earth meant to fit together, and God actually creating humans to bear his image within the world so that it's appropriate for him to become a human.

And then all those sayings in John suddenly look very different. Instead of Jesus going around and say, "Hey guys, I'm weird. I come from the other side," whatever, it's suddenly a sense that Israel's scriptures were always talking about the way in which God himself would come back and be the shepherd of his people and so on.

And Jesus, I am the good shepherd. It plugs exactly into that theme from Ezekiel 34 and so on, so that I think as well we have mistaken what it might mean to make messianic claims in the first century. Messiah and divinity are not the same thing, but there are several other would-be messiahs in the first century.

And I can hear Simon Barghi or Simon Barcock for somebody like that from either the 60s AD or the 130s AD saying, "Come with me and I'll give you light. I'm the light of the world. If you come with me, there won't be any darkness anymore." I think Jesus of Nazareth meant more than that, but I think we have to understand the political, social, messianic meaning and find the incarnational meaning within that.

What I'm hearing you saying, Tom, is that whereas people might have at one time considered these sayings in John to be somewhat strange and obscure compared to Matthew Mark and Luke, this new work by Hayes and others is actually showing how that all fits into that. There isn't that we can collapse the synoptics into a Johannine Christology, it's that for all four gospels we need a bigger vision of what it meant for first century Jews to re-inhabit the world of their scriptures, re-reading them around Jesus. The question is, and I think this is a question that often gets posed by skeptics anyway, is though that question of book, but given that John looks so different to the synoptics, can we assume that it's a later work, lots more theological embellishment? No, because the more we know about Matthew Mark and Luke, the more we recognize that they, and this is not new, this has been going on for 50 years, that Matthew Mark and Luke are also extremely creative, clever theologians.

And of course, that then could push people to say, well, in that case, there must have been two generations of development. And the answer is no, actually, when we look at other Jewish texts at the time, whether it's the wisdom of Solomon, whether it's Qumran, whether it's Josephus, there are lots of pretty smart people out there who know their scriptures extremely well and are interpreting events in their own time in the light of those scriptures. Now, that seems to me what's going on.

So I tell the students to be frank, I don't know whether all the Gospels were written as early as 45 AD or as late as 95 AD. I don't think they're that early. I don't think they're that late.

But nothing that no evidence that we have forces us to put them at any particular point. I think the key question a lot of people are still asking at this point is, but when it comes to those, I am statements, for instance, are we, are we to assume these are somehow verbatim statements that Jesus made, or are we looking at something which is someone's theological interpretation of his ministry? There is no such thing as a video camera sitting outside the synagogue in Capernaum, and all history consists of selection and arrangement. And that goes whether I'm writing about a football match that happened yesterday, or an evangelist is writing about Jesus' ministry.

So there is no mere fact. It is all interpreted. It is all arranged.

However, they are absolutely determined. And John among them, John says, well, the codicil to John, which we presume is written by somebody else at the end of chapter 21, says, this is the disciple who wrote these things, and we know that his witness is true. And yes, of course, if you once say that maybe the God of Israel, the Creator God, was walking among us, then what would this look like? Do we have a template in advance of what that would look like? And so yes, it is thoroughly credible.

As John Robinson argued a generation ago, actually, when you look at John, he goes back to source. He knew what he was talking about. And would he then, because you don't find those sayings in Matthew Mark and Luke, is your best guess he's using a different source to the ones that are using when it comes to him? I mean, Robinson said that John goes back to source.

In other words, that John's gospel is source itself. And that one of the reasons it's sort of jerky and the sum of the sequences are a bit odd is that it's written by an old man looking back on something that he remembered, but jolly were remembering it. And the crucial thing then is that it looks to me at least, as though at least Luke and quite possibly Matthew have used Mark, and as though Mark is the transcript or the vague record or something of Peter's preaching.

So that this is, none of them are trying to tell us everything that Jesus did. John explicitly says if I tried to do that, the world wouldn't contain you. So John, who's been very close

to Jesus, is remembering and writing down things which he knows the others haven't written down.

This is one theory anyway. And so why bother to tell you all the things that you know are already in Matthew Mark and Luke, he wants to give you this talk. Okay, that's interesting.

Thank you. Really, really helpful way of looking at it. Let's go to just, I think we've just got time for this, if you can keep it really short before we go to a break.

We've talked about biblical inerrancy. Dispensationalism, what's wrong with dispensationalism says Freddie magnanimous on Twitter. I don't know if that's really your name, Freddie.

But in any case, firstly, very quickly, what is dispensationalism for those who don't know, and do you think it's true? I'm not an expert on dispensationalism. My late father-in-law was a dispensationalist who cheerfully tried to explain things to me, and we just had little conversations about it. I never quite got the whole picture.

However, I know that dispensationalism sees that something didn't happen which maybe should have happened when Jesus presented the Word of God to God. The Word of God to the generation of his day. And so God's ultimate salvation plan got put on hold on a different dispensationalism's laws.

This is very broad brush, but that's basically how it works out. And that in the middle of that, the hope that is then set before us is a literal reading of 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, which talks about the Lord descending from heaven and the saints flying up in the air and meeting him there. So dispensationalists are often into what might be called a theology of the rapture.

The rapture, and it's very dualistic theology where the present world is going to be burnt up and we'll be taken off to heaven. And I wrote an article about this some years ago, and somebody wrote to the magazine, cancelling their subscription and saying, "How does Mr. Wright expect to get to heaven if he doesn't get raptured?" and so on. So that's been the focus of it.

Now I want to say the entire framework is actually misconceived, particularly because the framework of what we're promised is not an escape from this world to some work called heaven, but new heavens and new earth. And the crucial passages, both in Revelation and then that bit in 1 Thessalonians 4, simply don't mean what those views say they mean. I've written about this blank.

And I've written about this blank. And the whole issue that occurs, I think, is a Matthew chapter. When Jesus talks about, "There are those here who won't taste death until they see me coming in the clouds with glory." And this is about the interpretation of Daniel 7,

which is about the Son of Man coming on the clouds.

It's quite clear, both from Daniel 7 itself and from the interpretation of Daniel 7 in other 1st century literature like 4 Thesra and Josephus, that the Son of Man coming on the clouds is going upwards, not downwards. And it is being enthroned at the right hand of the ancient of days, that is of God the Father, if you like in Christian terms. And part of the point of this is the launching of God's kingdom.

What dispensationalism says is that the kingdom basically hasn't happened yet. We have to wait for that for later. And the four gospels are all saying that Jesus launched the kingdom of God on earth as in heaven and that we are the beneficiaries of that and its agents.

It sounds like you have pretty much answered "Dispensation" in your work, but we'll go to a quick break and we'll continue with the question. By the way, Tom hasn't seen any of these questions. I'm literally throwing them at him blind here.

But it's great to be joined by Tom Wright today, leading British New Testament scholar here on Unbelievable. We're asking him the questions you sent me over the last couple of weeks. So do stick around, we'll be back with more questions and answers from Tom Wright in a moment's time.

Joey Ra, God in Touchfire, our Facebook page, and says a pastoral question from a young working Christian struggling for direction in London. It's now clear to me with the help of your writings and talks that going to heaven after you die or avoiding hell is not the point of Christianity. What's your advice for the youth struggling to find meaning and direction in life when the message we've been fed by secular societies work for 50 years to get a pension, then retire? And the message from the church has been do your job diligently, believe in Jesus and maybe try to convert a few souls but basically just wait for heaven.

How do we do the kingdom work you speak of in your books? Yeah, great question. And I want to go straight to the themes which come up, particularly in the book of Revelation, when the book of Revelation talks about what is the purpose for which God is the purpose of which God is the purpose of the kingdom. It's the purpose for which God has redeemed us through Jesus.

And the answer is to be a kingdom and priests, which sounds very technical and a bit odd and most of us don't think of ourselves as either kings or priests. But this goes right back to the very beginning to Adam and Eve in the garden to the picture of what humans are created for. And it's first and foremost to worship God not just for ourselves but to sum up the praises of all creation.

That may sound a little recondite but actually most of us do resonate with some aspects of the wider world, whether it's glorious sunshine or the pounding sea or whatever it is.

And there's a sense in which we're all called to thank God for his greatness, his power, his beauty in creation. And that then overflows in the other direction in that we are all called in one way or another to be image bearers, that is to be wise stewards through whom God's love and purposes come into the world.

And that is particularly relevant when we're in families that we are responsible for other people in whatever way, including children being partially responsible for their parents, I would say, their siblings. But it's also to do with all the different projects which will bring God's love and care and healing to the world. And there are many, many different vocations in which that can be applied, whether it's politics or whether it's digging ditches or anything in between.

Whether it's writing a symphony or going and helping in an old people's home or whatever it may be. And sometimes after I've spoken on the task of the church in the contemporary world, young people come up with this confused look and say, "There are so many things I could do. I really don't know where to start.

I want to help." And I say, "Hang in there. Stay with your worshiping community." And when it's appropriate, pray especially for the particular leading that God wants for you because you will have particular gifting. Particular gifting, particular inclinations.

And it's highly likely that God will lead you through those giftings and inclinations into one particular field. And that may well involve different changes and some puzzles and so on along the way. And we can never, you know, being in the church doesn't guarantee you full employment, et cetera, et cetera.

But there are always things we can do, but we need to do them together. It's important to be part of a worshiping community and particularly to be working with a pastor or a pastoral group who can put an arm around your shoulder, literally, or metaphorically and say, "You know, I've always thought you were really good at such and such. Perhaps God wants you to be exploring that." And again and again, you can see the lights going on and people finding a way forward.

Though it can be tough and I work with people who are struggling with vocation. And so I don't pretend that it's easy. But that's the thing to be worshiping, to be stewards, to be the priests of creation, and to be the ones who are bringing the Kingdom of God into the world in whatever way we're called to do.

I hope that's of some help there for that particular question. Quite a few questions on issues around salvation and heaven and hell and that kind of thing. One of the interesting ones which I've put under the label, No True Scotsman/Christian, comes from, if you want to be a Christian, comes from Matthew Taylor who emailed in to say, "There are many Christians who hold a view that want someone to save.

They cannot become unsaved, so those who leave the faith were somehow deceived and can't have been saved in the first place, regardless of how strongly they believed or perhaps the effectiveness of the ministry they had. Does this theology make God complicit in that deceit and therefore can't be a perfect loving God?" Now, I don't know whether you want to just address the premise of the question. I think you're right, actually.

I think part of the trouble we have here is because we have lived in a world for hundreds of years, actually. Both Catholic and Protestant and liberal and charismatic. Everyone has had this idea that ultimately it's about, "Are we going to heaven or aren't we?" And some people say, "Well, everybody is." And others say, "No, there's a definite line." And then, "How do you know?" And "How can you tell?" And I want to say to that whole tradition, I understand that.

I've lived there. This is not what the Bible is talking about. The Bible is talking about God's rescue operation for the whole creation.

And when you look at Revelation 21 and 22, this is not about saved souls going up to heaven. It's about the city of God coming down from heaven to earth. And then here is the dwelling of God with humans.

And humans have this task of helping God run his glorious world and worshiping him as they do so. And there is a point which says, "Outside are the people who make lies, the people who do this and that and the other, so that it's clear this is not an easygoing universalism. But nor is it simply a system of salvation, a kind of mechanistic thing.

The mechanistic salvation systems grew up in the 17th and 18th century when people were fascinated by machines like making new kinds of clocks and that sort of thing. And they tried to do diagrams of salvation, which were almost like a clock with all the different dials working together. And I know this is on radio, but I'm putting my hands together so that the fingers make a sort of mesh dial.

And really that's one way of getting at some bits of biblical truth. But I want to say pan back and just read Isaiah as a whole, or some of 40, 55 as a whole. Read the Psalms, read the Gospels at a run.

And they're not talking about this kind of thing. They're talking about God's purposes to renew and restore creation, catching us up in the process. Okay, we will be rescued as we're caught up in that process.

But the question of help, am I really rescued and is so and so next autumn year, is he or she not really rescued? Ultimately that may matter. But as soon as we focus on those questions and on the mechanics, the clockwork of it, then we are being distracted from our primary tasks. Okay, this is another kind of mechanics question.

So you may equally sort of not want to address it in the direct way. I think people want to know kind of your thoughts on some of the contentious issues, some of the doctrinal debates that have been going on. And obviously, at least with the atonement, we're looking forward to your particular take on that.

This one though is from someone who wants to ask you if I can find the right piece of paper, what your thoughts are on hell. This is Willwood. Is it merely separation into self-destruction, or is God present in both heaven and hell? Meaning eternal conscious torment is true.

Now, there's a wide variety of different ways people have conceived hell, talked about hell. We've done a number of those debates on this program. So I guess people are interested to know, do you subscribe to a sort of an annihilationist type of view? Do you have some hope of universalism at some point? Do you believe there's some kind of eternal conscious torment? Yeah, this is obviously a difficult one partly because a lot of the language, which the Bible uses about everything to do with the ultimate future, is picture language.

And if we take those pictures and imagine that we can then turn them into a sort of scientific system, then that's simply not how pictures work. It's rather as if we were to read Luke 15 and say, we really need to know as we read the story of the prodigal son. Where did they live? What was the address? Can we go and visit the farm? And the answer is no, that's not the point.

That's not what you're supposed to do with that kind of story. And the other thing is that a lot of the images of judgment in the New Testament are very specifically focused on Jesus' warnings about the destruction of Jerusalem. Take the beginning of Luke 13, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

He's talking very specifically about what's going to happen when Rome finally comes and destroys Jerusalem, as people could see what was highly likely in his day. So we have to be very careful about which texts we do what with. Now, when I think about the ultimate future, I do believe that God, having made human beings, has made us to reflect... Creations praises back to him, to reflect his love into the world, and that it is possible for people to say, I don't want to be that kind of an angled mirror reflecting like that.

I'm just going to reflect all the buzz that's going on into the world back into the world, and I'm going to have a good time doing it. And if you do that, you're reflecting death back to death, basically. And if you do that, you are saying, I don't want to be a genuine God-reflecting human being.

And it seems to me part of the deal, if you like, is God saying, you have a choice. It's very clear in the end of Deuteronomy, many other passages, you have a choice, choose life that you may live, rather than the other way. So I really do think there is some kind

of a choice.

Our trouble is that we live in a very articulate modern world where people know what choices are and can line up the factors involved. 99% of the human race, so most of its history, has not been articulate in the sort of modern rationalist way that we are, so that the choices do not present themselves in terms of, here are three things that I can write out on a piece of paper versus those ones. It's much deeper down in the gut and in the heart and in the imagination, but there are choices that can be made, and those choices include the choice to say no to God.

Now, I do not know quite what happens after that. I know that most of the biblical language about what happens after that is picture language, but it seems to me I want to sit somewhere between the different theories that have come up about this, because it seems to me that if God is saying, "Okay, you are choosing not to be a genuine human being, therefore I'm sorry, but you are going to be no longer a genuine human being." There is a sort of potential state which we can imagine. Again, I want to say, I don't like imagining this because I'm talking about people I know.

I'm talking about people I love here. And as soon as we start saying, "Oh, yes, that lot," then we have to watch out because that's amazingly arrogant. But I think it is possible that in the mercy of God, such people may become, as it were, ex-human beings, and that there may be a moment, and some Catholic theologians have written about this, there may be a terrible, terrible moment when they see that they have made this choice and that that's it.

But whether there is then, people have talked about conscious torment and so on, Lewis, C.S. Lewis has a phrase about the fix-ed pains of hell. It's a part of a poem he wrote, as though there is a pain, but it's not kind of infinite. It's just a sort of slow, sad sorrow.

I think it's about as far as we can go. Lewis, obviously, did write in different ways about heaven and hell. In the last of the Narnia books, the last battle, going in the other direction, if you like, many people have seen him adopting a sort of inclusivist view of other religions.

Up to a point, because there's one soldier who has worshipped Tash all his life, but actually when he discovers who Tash is, that's not what I was after. And when he sees Aslan, he says, "It is you, I have worshipped all along," which is not inclusivist. That's actually more like Rana's idea of the anonymous Christian.

But insofar as he was being an anonymous Aslan worshipper, he wasn't actually being a very good Tash worshipper. The other thing you have to watch out for at the end of the last battle is the talking beasts who don't want to be on Aslan's side as it were. And they cease to be talking beasts, they become just ordinary animals again.

And I think Lewis is just giving us pictures of think what these choices are doing to you. Think of the sort of creature you are becoming rather than giving us a definite theory about either university. And I think from one of his early works, *The Great Divorce*, there you have a very definite picture of hell, but when you discover what it is, it's so thin and insubstantial that it can't blackmail God's new creation.

You can't say as long as we're here, you're not going to enjoy yourselves up there. It just doesn't have the capacity. It's very nearly nothingness.

And I think that's a very wise place of Lewis to stay there. Let's move from that big subject to another big subject, *The Resurrection of Christ*, something you've dealt with obviously in great detail in books like *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. This one from Facebook, Josh Perique, who if you haven't come across him, Tom, keep your eyes on Josh.

He's a very talented young philosopher at Oxford University. And just one of the brightest young guys I've met. But anyway, he's got this particular question.

Given your argument in *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, which I've read, how do you deal with Matthew 27 and Mark 6, where John the Baptist is supposedly raised from the dead? Do these show that resurrection before the end of the world was an idea in people's consciousness before Jesus? So you're well known for saying the idea of resurrection before the end of the world is a novel concept and wouldn't have been what those disciples were expecting. This is if you like an evidence for a strange thing to make up. Yes.

Well, of course, already in the Old Testament you have Elijah raising people from the dead. But those people, of course, would have to die again. This is not resurrection with the capital R, which in the New Testament we discover is actually not coming back into this life, but going through death and out into God's new creation, the other side, which confusingly happens to overlap and into play with R. with our resurrection, sorry, with our present creative world.

The Mark 6 passages where Herod says, "Ah, this is John the Baptist raised from the dead." And that's why these mighty works are going on in him. And I rather want to say, I don't think we learn very much about first century theology from Herod Antipas. I suspect he didn't actually know very much about it.

However, the idea of resurrection is around. It's in the air. But when I talk about resurrection being something God is going to do to everybody at the end rather than to one person in the middle, then this is the mature developed view of, for instance, 2nd Maccabees or of the later rabbis and all sorts of things in between, that resurrection is part of the eventual new creation, which obviously hasn't happened yet.

So that if you think, "Oh my goodness, how's this man got such power? Maybe he's John the Baptist. He's come back to haunt me." I think that's all that's going on there. I don't think it's anything more.

The Matthew 27 one is harder, and I've written little bits about it, but I didn't know. Just give us the context. Give us the context.

In particular theory, this is that after Jesus' death, there is an earthquake, and Matthew says, "Many bodies of the saints that had slept in other words that had died were raised from, that came out from their tombs, and went into the Holy City and appeared to many." Now, some of the early fathers were fascinated by this, and they assumed that because these people have been raised from the dead, they were all still alive because they wouldn't die again, and that if you went to Jerusalem, you could meet them. Now, that's just a theory. I don't think anyone, Jerome or anyone actually thought they had met such people who would by then be hundreds and hundreds of years old.

So I think what we're looking at is Matthew retelling us something very strange as a sort of, there's a cosmic shockwave goes through, which is about people being alive again, because death has been overcome. It goes in my mind with 1 Peter 3, the bit about Jesus going and preaching to the spirits in prison, and we're not quite sure who they are and so on. It's to do, though, with what I've written about in my new book, that when Jesus dies, the world is actually a different place from the evening of Good Friday, whether or not we realize it.

Now, some people say, "Yep, that's what Matthew's saying, but of course it's just a picture." And other people will say, "Well, that is what Matthew's saying, but it looks as though something very odd happened, but then I have a question, so what did they do then? If they didn't just hang around forever and ever, did they like the ghost in Gildensarvon's ruddy gourd, did they go and lie down again? And if so, so what?" So I don't have a great theory on that. I have written little bits about it in my various books, but I mean, the crucial thing to say is it doesn't interfere with the normal Jewish idea, which is there in all the resurrection texts right through from Daniel right through to the rabbis, that resurrection is something that was supposed to happen to everybody at the end, not to one person in the middle. Another question on resurrection, Alexander Velasquez asks, "Richard Swinburn apparently calculates the probability that Christ resurrected at 97%.

Would you agree with that number? Put in other words, is it almost certain that Christ resurrected from the dead, or do liberal scholars have any good arguments in opposition that would put that certainty into question?" I'm not a fan of Richard Swinburn's way of doing theology, which is to line up a sort of Bayes theorem in which you can say, "Now, supposing the probability of this is 60%, supposing the probability of that is 8%, then let's calculate these out. I just don't think you can do history that way." I know there are

some people who want to push back against me on that, but it just seems to me this is not how ancient historians or modern historians calculate things that actually happened. Now, maybe you can start a priori and say, "If there is a God who made the world, if he loves us, and if he's a good creator, then dot, dot, dot." Whenever I meet theologians who then say, "Such and such is true, therefore, it must be the case that the word must give me shit down the spine." It's rather like the word "surely," which means I really want to say this, but I haven't quite figured out how.

So I want to say, I have mounted as careful an argument as I know how in my various books on the resurrection, to say that actually when you look at all the evidence, the best reason for why Christianity got off the ground is that God really did raise Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. And that is disciples. By the way, using the word Christ as a proper name doesn't really help there because it should be Jesus.

My old philosopher, Tutor from Oxford, read my book on the resurrection. He's a lifelong atheist. And he wrote to me, he said, "This is fascinating.

You made a really good argument. I simply choose to believe that there must have been another way that Christianity got off the ground, even though I can't at the moment think what that might have been." To which my response is, absolutely. It's your choice to believe that there must have been some other way because, of course, we know that dead people don't pop back from the grave.

This is not... And everybody knew that in the ancient world, just as we do today. So all I think... I don't think you can prove these things, and that's not how history works. But the proof then, it's a different sort of proof comes, that if for a moment you suppose that maybe this was right, and if you start working on living with people, you're not going to be able to do it.

And living with people who also believe this, and then working to see if God's new life isn't work in the world, actually, as you look back over the last 2000 years, despite the snares of the modernists, yeah, actually, this does make a lot of sense. That's a different kind of proof from the sort that Swinburne is imagining. If I may put in one of my own questions at this point, I was having a conversation, was it very fortunate to have a conversation sit down recording with Darren Brown, the well-known TV illusionist and mentalist.

Now an atheist was once a Christian, and when I asked him about his deconversion, he cited the fact that when he looked into the resurrection, he just wasn't convinced in the end. Now, this was 20 or more years ago, and I don't know exactly what sources he was looking at, but I certainly recommended he go and read some of your books. But one of the things he said was, "Well, it seemed to me from what I was reading, that Paul only had a sort of belief in a sort of spiritual resurrection, and I think this idea of a bodily resurrection, something could be done." So, this is actually the truth is the exact

opposite of that, that in the first century, the word resurrection, the Greek word anastasis and its various cognates, always refers to somebody who's been physically dead, being physically alive again.

The idea that the word resurrection could refer to something which didn't involve a body, I think only comes in by the end of the second century with the movement called Gnosticism, with some of the tracts from that movement, where they use the early Christian resurrection narrative, basically for advocating a form of Platonism. Platonism, middle Platonism at this point is very powerful writers like Plutarch, who say that our souls are exiled from heaven and our aim is to leave our bodies behind and go back to heaven. That's what a lot of Christians think the gospel is, and the answer is no.

For Paul, it's about bodies. Now, here's the trick. The very difficult bit in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, verse is, well, it's 40 onwards.

Paul comes to it step by step, and he says that the body which is put in the ground is one sort of body, and the body which is raised is another sort. The trouble is the RSV, the NRSV, many translations say that the first one is a physical body, and the second one is a spiritual body. Now, because we are Platonists with our mothers' milk, we think that means non-bodily.

And the first adjective doesn't mean physical. It means "soulish." It means "animated by soul." And the second one doesn't mean "spiritual, i.e. non-physical." It means "animated by God's Spirit." But it is still a body because the kind of Greek adjectives that they are. I always tell my students, you know, fasten your seat belts before you listen to this one, but there are different kinds of adjectives, and these ones tell you not what something is made of, but what it is driven by.

It's the difference between saying is this a steamship or is it a saleship? We're not talking about what it's made of, we're talking about what's driving it. So here, the first body, the present one, is animated by the ordinary human interiority. The future one will be a body animated by God's Spirit.

Gonna chuck one more at you before we go to a final break and then we'll just have one more question, maybe time for. This is a big one, so you'll have to boil it down. But Andrew Coburn and students from Fuller Seminary wrote in, out in the States, asking, "How do you read ancient non-canonized writings that aspired to be equal to Scripture? For example, how do you reconcile the fact that the Gospel of Mary was not included in the canon for particular reasons in complete questionable authenticity? And yet also, can we ascribe meaning and gain insight from what it says, even though it's non-canonical? There are many, many books which are written in the two or three centuries or four or five centuries after Jesus.

The books called the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Judas, the

Gospel of the Egyptians, the D'Allemm, lots of them. The best guess currently of scholarship is that these are starting to emerge about the middle of the second century AD. They do not go back to anything like as early as the actual Gospels.

There has been an enormous American fad for trying to date them early because the American default religion is Gnosticism. And ever since, I mean, this is not me saying, it's people like Harold Bloom and so on. And ever since the Enlightenment, the natural American tendency has been to turn Christianity into some sort of Gnosticism, which is about me discovering who I really am rather than God rescuing me and giving me a fresh identity in Christ.

Those so-called Gospels basically go that route. Now, that's not to say they may not contain some sayings of Jesus. If you look at my book, "Jesus and the Victory of God," it has dozens and dozens of references in the footnotes to those other Gospels, because saying by saying I'm examining them to see, yeah, that might actually make sense.

What is historical value? Exactly. And there's nothing to say that they can't have historical value. Actually, I think if you want to know what non-canonical books you ought to read, read the Apostolic Fathers, read Polycarp, read Justin Martyr.

These are amazing books. And in the Jewish tradition, read the wisdom of Solomon, read 4th Ezra, read Josephus, read the Dead Sea Scrolls. These will give you a great insight into what it was like to be wise and and doing that.

You know, people, Chris, many Christians would think, well, I've got my Bible and that's enough. Is there any spiritual value to reading those other books? All sorts of spiritual value because the spiritual value in the New Testament comes from understanding what the writers really meant. And if you want to know what they really meant, the best clue is not some wise commentator writing in the 16th or the 19th century, but other Jewish writers in the first century.

You can compare and contrast. Absolutely. I thought maybe Fanta's finished with less of these in-depth scholarly biblical questions.

And one or two, just personal questions people wanted to ask, like Chris Woolridge, who on Facebook asked, "From your experience as a bishop, what do you remember most fondly? What do you regret most?" Now, that's a tough one, but what's your fondest memory, first of all? Great question. I think my fondest memory are of the visits I made to some particular communities where I could actually see what the kingdom of God looks like when people are doing it. I'll give you a couple of examples.

One is a particular parish where for some reason I don't know why they had 15 or 20 young people who had Down syndrome who were valued members of that church and who would sit in the front pew on the right. I can see them in my mind's eyes. I'm

celebrating the Eucharist.

And they would know the whole service and they would join in, including with the priests part, which was wonderful. And when it was time to come up for communion, they would be the first up and their faces would be shining with love and delight. And then over coffee hour, they were the ones who were handing around the coffee to all the other guests.

And I thought to myself, where else in the whole world, other than in a church, would you find a bunch of people like this with this particular condition who were accepted and cherished and valued and everybody knew them and they knew everybody? And that was just a wonderful sign of God's rescuing inclusive, redemptive power. Another place where I remember going where there was a group of folk from a church who had taken over an old school that was redundant and were using it as a daycare centre for people with very serious disabilities handicaps. And where one of the things these people were being trained to do was to mend broken furniture.

And people would send in chairs and tables and goodness knows what. And these people, some young, some old, with very serious disabilities themselves were fixing things and sending them out. And I found that a very profound and deeply Christian thing.

And of course, there are many other places where I saw one of my favourites was doing the Street Pastors thing. One good Friday, I went out with Street Pastors in Stockton on Tees in my long purple casser and my high-vis yellow jacket, which was quite a sight. And before we went out to go around the clubs and the pubs and just to be there as a wise presence on the street, I spoke to the Chief of Police in Stockton who was an old-fashioned atheist, who said, "I don't believe any of these stuff." He said, "But since your people have been doing this, the crime rate at the weekends has dropped dramatically." He said, "Whatever it is you're doing, carry on." And I just thought, "This is what doing the kingdom actually looks like." I have lots of regrets, inevitably.

I wasn't there long enough. In one sense, I regret that I couldn't actually continue my scholarly work and writing while I was doing it, so one thing had to go. But particularly, I regret that actually I allowed my agendas to be set by probably too many small-scale things.

I love the small-scale things, opening a new primary school, helping out with this or that. I should actually have been able to think more strategically about some larger things that I'd like to have got involved with. But you do what you can at the time.

And a bishop's life is incredibly busy. You say your prayers, you have the odd retreat, you think you can set some priorities, and then you're just running from morning to night and grabbing prayer on the way. And so trying to write a few books.

Trying to write a few books. Finally, I will leave the last one to Brandon Meakes, who gets in touch on Twitter to say, "What kind of books do you like to read for pleasure? And do you have a favorite musical piece?" Musical piece, Beethoven's Seventh Symphony. There is no other symphony like that.

I could go a long way else, but that's where I would like. We're going to play it towards the end of today's program. Oh, the great.

It's a full 20 minutes. So what happens? Maybe a sniff. And the trombone solo is just... Which books are like... I'm very eclectic in books I like to read.

I read quite a lot of poetry. I love T.S. Eliot and I go back to him frequently. If I'm really tired late at night and just want to read something as I slip into sleep, I will often just grab a bit of C.S. Lewis.

Or indeed, Bernard Levin, one of the great journalists from a previous generation. I love to read history. I love to read biography.

But poetry is quite high on the list. I read the Times Literary Supplement every week, and almost every week there's one thing that I say, "Ah, I'm going to get back and read it." And it might be philosophy, it might be history, it might be science, whatever. Big advocate of reading.

But anti-write, Tom Wright, thank you very much for giving me. Thank you. On the program today.

Thank you for all those questions. I'll just say completely blind. You enter those.

So I do appreciate it. Do come back next week. Tom joins me again in company of another Tom, a notable New Testament scholar Tom Schreiner.

And they're going to be looking at anti-write's new book on atonement. So we're really looking forward to that discussion at the same time next week. For the moment, thank you for being with me.

Thank you. I hope you enjoyed that replay of today's show. Thank you for being part of it.

You can find more, get our newsletter, support us, and get the link to ask a question of Tom at premierunbelievable.com. By the way, the next big thing coming up on the unbelievable calendar is our next unbelievable live show on sexuality, gender, and identity. I'm going to be joined by same-sex attracted Christians on both sides of this debate. Andrew Bunt and Charlie Bell.

So do join us live on Tuesday, the 7th of February from anywhere in the world online. You can ask your questions as part of that. Hopefully you know the website to do that now.

Unbelievable.live. Free to attend. You just need to register there. That's unbelievable.live. As I suggested earlier, why not leave you with a bit of Cebelius's 7th symphony, the trombone part in particular, conducted by Sir Mark Elder with the Hallé Orchestra at the BBC Proms.

[Music]

[Music]

[Music]

[Music]

[Music]

(gentle music)