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**Annie:** Hi friends! Welcome to our last regular episode of 2023 on That Sounds Fun. I'm your host Annie F. Downs. I'm so happy to be here with you today. So grateful for another really fun year on the podcast. Don't forget we've got something special for you on Christmas Eve, and then our buddy Eddie Kaufholz will be back the last Thursday of the year to do a year in review.

And stick around later in the show as our That Sounds Fun Network hosts will tell you some of their favorite Christmas snacks.

Before we dive into today's episode, I want to tell you about one of our incredible sponsors. This show is sponsored by [BetterHelp](#). I know this is the season when we're shopping and wrapping up gifts for the loved ones in our lives. But maybe consider a little gift for yourself, too. What would it look like to gift yourself some time in therapy? I wonder what your 2024 could be like if you made some space to process all the things going on in and around you.

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**Intro:** Today on the show, oh, I'm so honored I got to talk with my new friend, Dr. N.T. Wright. Y'all know talking to theologians is my favorite. So getting to talk to Dr. Wright is like next-level stuff. He is one of the world's leading New Testament scholars, so you know we talked about the Gospels, and he's an award-winning author of many books, including his newest deep dive on Romans called *Into the Heart of Romans*.

I love this conversation. I've been dying for you all to hear it. I was lucky enough to get to record with him in person at the Hephzibah House in New York City. I'm so thankful to them for letting us record in their studio. So here's my conversation with Dr. N.T. Wright.

[00:02:10] <Music>

**Annie:** Dr. Wright, welcome to That Sounds Fun.

**N.T Wright:** Thank you very much. Good to be here.

**Annie:** Oh, it's such an honor to be here. I cannot believe I get to sit in a room with you. Your writing has just impacted, I mean, 90 books, is that right? How many books?

**N.T Wright:** Getting on that way. Depends how you count them.

**Annie:** Fair. As we're sitting here, I'm thinking about our mutual friends we share like Luke Norsworthy. Ain't he the best?

**N.T Wright:** Yes, I've done podcasts with him before. Yes. Yes. I'm not sure we've ever met face to face, but-

**Annie:** Oh, it's all been on-

**N.T Wright:** It's probably been on Zoom.

**Annie:** I remember so clearly the episode you did when you released I think it was an e-book during COVID.

**N.T Wright:** Oh, on the pandemic.

**Annie:** Yeah. Yeah.

**N.T Wright:** Which then did come out as a proper book.

**Annie:** Oh, wow. I remember downloading... I mean, reading and listening to that conversation and thought, I'm so thankful for you having the insight into that. Will you talk a little bit about that season as far as how did you know what to start writing? How did you know to find what you did in Scripture around a pandemic?

**N.T Wright:** Yeah. It was curious. I mean, what happened was that it began with an invitation from Time Magazine to write just a 700-word piece, which I'm not sure it even made it into the print magazine. I think it was simply on their website. So as I've been thinking about it and working with folks in Oxford, where I live, who were struggling with the fact that churches are being shut and so on, it seemed to me the most important thing to say was lament.

The most important thing to say was not we have a solution for this, namely, God is punishing people for doing X, Y, or Z. But rather this is a very strange season, we weren't expecting it, and the most important thing to do is to grab hold of the

Psalms, which say, "Lord, why is this going on?" And then to discover that in Romans 8 Paul is doing exactly that. You know, that's always been important to me, but that kind of gave it more depth.

I wasn't expecting that having written that little Time magazine article there would be a Twitter storm saying, Oh, N.T. Wright doesn't read the Bible because in the book of Amos, it says that the reason this has happened is because you were wicked and you did this and that and the other.

So I thought, excuse me, "There is also the book of Jacob. There is also Psalm 44 and Psalm 88, which just say, "There is absolutely no reason for this, you know, our heart has not turned back from you, we've not been forced to the covenant, and yet we're in a mess. Now do something about it." So I explored that.

And then I was asked to do one or two lectures online for church groups that I knew and that were wanting the sort of input that I was giving. So I did maybe two, three, four lectures. And then I looked at them and I said to the publishers, I think that there's a little book in here. And they said, "Well, write out and see what happens." So I did. I hadn't expected to do it, but sometimes these things work out.

**Annie:** That's right. Do you write every day?

**N.T. Wright:** It depends. No. I'm usually working on something at least six days a week. But if it's in the reading mode, then it's in the reading mode and I'll just be taking scribbled notes. So I don't have a set pattern. But once a project gets going, then I get kind of hungry for it and make my way eagerly into the study and get on with it.

**Annie:** Yes. One of the things we talk about a lot around here is chasing your curiosity in scripture and kind of going, wait, why is that? Why is that? Why is that? Is that how you find your books?

**N.T. Wright:** Ooh, some of them. Some of them, yes. But chasing curiosity, it's a good phrase. I was fortunate when I studied theology a thousand years ago, the set text that we used in Oxford is the old 1880s revised version. And the addition of that that I still have on my desk had lots and lots and lots of good cross-references all the way through.

So any passage you're studying, there'll be things in the margin which say, you might want to check out Exodus 32 here or Psalm 46 or whatever, and you go back. And then they lead you to other places as well. And in theory, you might have known about those things. So those references plus the concordance... a wise man said to me 50 years ago, the best clue for the New Testament is the concordance to the Greek Old Testament because that was their Bible. And when they're referring

to, whether it's a word or a phrase, or an idea, again and again, they didn't have many books, and the one that they had, they knew pretty well.

So, channeling Exodus, Isaiah, Deuteronomy, Malachi, whatever, that's how again and again, that's the substructure of so much New Testament theology. And then, yeah, curiosity. So I'm making little notes and I'm putting it together. I'm doing that this weekend, actually. There's talks I'm doing here in New York.

**Annie:** Oh, yeah. What are you chasing?

**N.T Wright:** Ephesians. But it's extraordinary reading the commentary is how often people miss some of the, to me, most obvious things like "that you may be filled with all the fullness of God". This is temple language. This is about Yahweh coming to fill the temple against the day when He will eventually fill all creation. That's what Ephesians is about. And how come people miss it? They're not listening for those Old Testament echoes.

**Annie:** That's right. That's right. So should we, we don't like to "should" people too much, but should we have a concordance? Is that one of the things you're like, have a Bible and have a concordance?

**N.T Wright:** Concordance is enormously helpful if you want to do any serious Bible study. I inherited an English concordance to the King James version from my grandfather who was a minister.

**Annie:** Wow.

**N.T Wright:** But then quite quickly graduated onto the Greek one and the Hebrew one. Those are books I just love pulling off the shelf because you just know there's gonna be curious stuff going on.

**Annie:** And unlike an encyclopedia, it's not changing. Like encyclopedias feel like they've aged.

**N.T Wright:** That's right.

**Annie:** But a concordance doesn't age, correct.

**N.T Wright:** Concordance basically doesn't age. And if it's on the Greek and Hebrew text, then we're dealing with the original here. So yeah, let's go with it.

**Annie:** When we think about the disciples and Jesus and Paul... I can't wait to tell you about my relationship with Paul. When we think about the disciples in Jesus and Paul, they had how much of the Old Testament memorized?

**N.T Wright:** That's a good question. I mean, Jesus, I'm sure knew-

**Annie:** Well, yeah, I guess He knew it all, didn't He?

**N.T Wright:** Well, yeah. But I mean, humanly speaking, he was obviously a well-educated Jewish boy. He knew His scriptures. How much is actually in the front of the memory, I don't know. Paul is extraordinary. One of my colleagues who used to teach in Oxford with me and is now sadly passed away, but he said Paul kept his Bible where it belongs in his head, you know?

**Annie:** Wow.

**N.T Wright:** There are to this day rabbinic students who have the whole, not only of the Mishna, but also the Talmud in their heads. And that's like a shelf full of volumes. It is possible. Scripture like music, like Shakespeare, like so on, once you get into it, you know... a Shakespeare actor will have the whole of Shakespeare in his head. And why not? Because there are clues and there are keys. It's perfectly possible.

Another colleague of mine, when I was teaching in St. Andrews, who's an expert on the book of Ezekiel, he said, if we think we can hear an echo of scripture, be sure that they heard it loud and clear because they knew their stuff much better than we do.

**Annie:** Oh, right.

**N.T Wright:** So we may think there's a faint echo, the chances are that they'd spotted that.

**Annie:** That's a really beautiful part of *Into the Heart of Romans* where you keep calling back to Paul's talking about the Old Testament, Paul's talking about Exodus, Paul's talking about... and then this book on Romans 8, I hadn't known that as well. And I love at the beginning where you give people this like, Hey, some people teach Paul by saying, here's what he meant to say. And that's dangerous, right?

**N.T Wright:** I ran into that early on when I was studying, many years ago, commentators who would walk you through, but at a certain point say, Paul is a bit obscure here, his illustration runs away with itself and he wasn't very good at using analogies, etc. And I said, That's so patronizing. Because actually all it takes is even a slight shift of perspective and you see he said exactly what he meant. And he's sitting there thinking, how dare you say I didn't know what I was talking about?

**Annie:** Will you talk through the three questions we're supposed to ask when we're reading Romans?

**N.T. Wright:** Well, this is like line by line again and again or paragraph or paragraph again and again. I've said this to my students over the years: you have to look at the beginning and end of each paragraph. And Paul tends to write in paragraphs. And sometimes-

**Annie:** I thought that was fascinating when you were like, he always does a shorter beginning, a short end, and a long middle.

**N.T. Wright:** That's right. I mean, Romans 8:1-11 famous paragraph, there is therefore now no condemnation for those in Messiah Jesus. Fine. That's where we're going. Now there's a long and winding road to get there. But then at the end of verse 11, there we are. So if the spirit indwells you, then you will be raised from the dead as Jesus was.

Or you can take the whole chapter and say, well, no condemnation, right to the end of the chapter, nothing in all creation shall separate us from the love of God in Messiah Jesus. But then once you've got that, it's the kind of stabilizing thing so that you know that at least Paul thinks that the intermediate verses were going there. And then how was that happening? And then you can break that down further.

The second thing is the little connecting words because Paul uses these little words like *gar*, which means for, or because, and *dare*, which means but. And again scholars used to say, oh, well, Paul says here [*der?*] but he really means [*chi?*] or something. No, sorry, Paul actually... it's almost mathematical for Paul. He's deducing things, or he is saying, this happens because that. And only when you understand that does the thing come out.

But then the third thing, which is harder is how would this sit within the culture of the day, within the Jewish culture, within the Greco-Roman culture, etc. Now, of course, that demands all the study, you know, of the classical world and the Jewish world. And I've spent my life happily wandering around there bumping into things and wallowing in it.

But the more we know about that, the more sense it makes. So there are passages, I mean, for instance, when he is talking about the renewal of all creation, where in exactly the time of Paul, some of the Roman poets are saying, because we have this great new empire—you know, they're all caught poets being paid by Augustus or whoever—therefore now creation is blossoming as never before. And Paul is saying, actually, sorry, this is where it really happens.

So all these different strands, the micro stuff of the paragraphs and the small words and the macro stuff of, now that you've got that picture, think how they would hear it in that world. This has been the delight of my life to go through the New Testament reading it like this.

**Annie:** So with Paul particularly... this is not my problem with Paul. My problem with Paul... you saved my friendship with Paul in your book on... you're like, Paul book made me feel like he was someone I would actually like being around. When I read him I feel like he's bossy.

**N.T Wright:** Oh, I'm sure he is. But I say, did you read the biography?

**Annie:** Yes. Yeah.

**N.T Wright:** I think I say the, you know, Paul is a high-maintenance friend. He's a friend, but you kind of twitchy when you're with him in different situations.

**Annie:** Yes. I joke all the time that when we get to heaven that y'all can all line up for Paul, and I'll hang out with Peter until he's not busy anymore, and then I'll have coffee with Paul.

**N.T Wright:** We need to make some fine tuning adjustment to this "when I get to heaven stuff", as I'm sure you know. Have you read *Surprised by Hope*?

**Annie:** No.

**N.T Wright:** Oh. Oh.

**Annie:** No. Do I need to read *Surprised by Hope*?

**N.T Wright:** Ma'am, you do.

**Annie:** Okay.

**N.T Wright:** That's probably my best-known book in the States, I would think, *Surprised by Hope*.

**Annie:** I missed it. I'm so sorry.

**Annie:** I jumped right into the Paul stuff.

**N.T Wright:** I'm deeply shocked, but-

**Annie:** Oh, I'm sorry.

**N.T Wright:** Because as you see in Romans 8 when Paul talks about inheritance, so many Western Christians, whether they be Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal, liberal, whatever, they assume that inheritance means going to heaven when we die. And it really, really, really doesn't. It's the whole creation.

He says in Romans 4, God's promise to Abraham was that he would inherit the world. And we kind of skate over that. But the point is that the promise and this is really very important, the promise to Abraham of the land was the foretaste of God's promise of the whole creation.

**Annie:** The whole creation.

**N.T Wright:** The land is an advanced metaphor for the whole creation just like the temple is an advanced metaphor for God's intention to fill all creation with His presence and love. And that's very, very germane to Romans 8 as well.

**Annie:** Oh, right.

**N.T Wright:** I mean, all of this stuff is, I would now see as basic. The trouble is we've all been... and it's really medieval. The Middle Ages with the Aristotelian philosophy they thought that the main thing was for the soul to get up to heaven. The whole of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation is about how God wants to come and dwell with us. The strapline at the end of Revelation is not the dwelling of humans is with God, but the dwelling of God is with humans. That's not accidental. I say this to my children. My wife now does it deliberately to me, she says, "When we get to heaven," knowing perfectly well that I will say, no, don't. So kind of wind each other up on that one.

**Annie:** That's right.

**[00:14:56] <Music>**

**Sponsor:** Hey friends! Just interrupting this conversation real quick to share about one of our new amazing partners, [Happy Viking](#). Listen, I love a smoothie and I have found a plant-based protein powder to use in it that I think you're going to love.

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That link in pretty much every other link you could ever hope for are in the show notes below. So be sure to check those out.

**Sponsor:** And one more amazing partner to tell you about, [Prose](#). Okay, y'all know we love a quiz around here, so I've got one for you to take. Prose has a hair consultation quiz where you answer questions on everything from the climate where you live, to the issues you're having with your hair, your hair type and texture, your eating habits. And then they analyze 85 personal factors and handpicked clean ingredients that get you closer to your hair goals with every single wash. I'm telling you, I've taken the quiz, I've gotten the shampoo and conditioner, and I love what Prose does for my hair. So do y'all. You tell me all the time.

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Okay, now back to our conversation with Dr. Wright.

[00:17:36] <Music>

**Annie:** So with Paul, so much of his writing, I mean, that first-century question is so helpful. Because I think the parts where Paul talks about submission in marriage riles people up. Where he talks about women teaching riles people up. But if we turn it with a first-century eye, is that the way we teach it-

**N.T Wright:** Oh, yes.

**Annie:** ...versus "what he meant to do was put a comma there, what he meant to do is put a question mark and, you know?"

**N.T Wright:** Well, the thing about the first century is it's a moral zoo and women are chattels or just not much above slaves, etc. And Paul, in Ephesians 5 and the parallel passages elsewhere is desperate to show that the whole Jesus project is about new creation, creation, you have man or woman in partnership symbolizing actually heaven and earth in partnership.

So Ephesians is all about the coming together of heaven and earth, symbolizing the coming together of Jew and Gentile and then symbolizing the coming together of man and woman in marriage. So this is an extraordinary ennobling vision of matrimony. As I say in another book written, oh, 20 years ago now, we assume that the Old Testament has rather strict laws, and then the New Testament comes along and says there "Never mind. Sorry".

**Annie:** Yeah. Yeah. That's right.

**N.T Wright:** We believe in grace, not law. Actually, if you look at monogamy, it's not a big theme of the Old Testament, to say the least. Think of Abraham, think of Jacob, think of David, think of Solomon.

**Annie:** All of them. Right.

**N.T Wright:** The Old Testament is clear that these people are all flawed characters, but the polygamy doesn't seem to worry them as much as some other things. In the New Testament, it's absolutely here we are. And if that's what the church is to model, then unless you're gonna say that there is no difference at all between men and women, which I mean psychologically, biologically would be foolish, it seems to me, then you're gonna have to think about appropriate complementarity.

I know that the complementary word has been abused by people who want to keep women in their place, as it were. But for Paul, it's an extraordinary new ideal to be grasped which would resonate out. I mean, by the end of the second century, it's

very interesting, not many people know this, there was a very famous doctor in the pagan Greek world called Galen.

And Galen wrote a lot of stuff. And he only knew two things about these strange people called Christians. On both counts, he thought they were mad. One was that they believed in the resurrection of the body. The other was that they didn't sleep around. And on both counts, he thought they were crazy because nobody believed in resurrection and everyone else had as much sex as they could wherever. And the Christians didn't.

So he knew there was something going on here, but didn't know what it was. And the answer is because they were creation monotheists. That is, they valued the goodness of the body so much, they believed God would raise it from the dead, and therefore they treated their own bodies and one another's with dignity and respect. Once you see that as the overarching thing, and you'd have Paul addressing that world, then all the other stuff kind of falls into place.

**Annie:** Yeah, that's right. I think I'm having a realization in the moment that there isn't polygamy in the New Testament really.

**N.T Wright:** No.

**Annie:** It really does drop off.

**N.T Wright:** It absolutely does. Mark 10, etc, etc. And it's interesting in the Pastorals, Paul, and people dispute whether they are by Paul, this is 1 and 2 Timothy and so on, when Paul is talking about qualification for holding ministerial office in the church, he says a man must be the husband of one wife, which implies to me that there are polygamists in the church. There are people who have come in-

**Annie:** He has to say it.

**N.T Wright:** And the church has not said, "You have to give up all the wives, but one," but you only have people holding public office if they are modeling this quite new and tricky and scary thing of monogamy.

**Annie:** Wow. So why was Paul the guy that you are most drawn to?

**N.T Wright:** Oh, I started philosophy as part of my first degree and ancient history as the other part. And that was a wonderful course. So when I then switched to theology for a second bachelor's degree, you kind of fall naturally in with Paul because you realize... You know, I cut my intellectual teeth on Plato and Aristotle when I was doing philosophy, and here is Paul who doesn't write nearly as much as them.

I mean, Plato and Aristotle's books fill shelves, but Paul's letters are just... but they are explosive with ideas from the Jewish world, but addressed into the Greco-Roman world, and so dense and so intricate and so intellectually fascinating that I think I was drawn by as well as... because when I was a student, I'd heard a lot of sermons and expositions of Paul, which didn't always agree with one another. And people got tangled up as to whether we were supposed to leave behind Romans 8 in order to get Romans 7 in order to get into Romans 8, those sort of questions, which come out of a 19th-century piety actually. And they're not stupid questions.

But then working back to, actually what was Paul himself talking about there? This was quite a talking point among me and my friends when I was in my twenties.

**Annie:** Oh, that's fun.

**N.T Wright:** Yeah. And then once you get into Paul, you know, life is not gonna be the same because all sorts of... the reward for every answer that you get is three more questions.

**Annie:** Right.

**N.T Wright:** So you're led on again by curiosity.

**Annie:** I think that's one of the things that keeps me loving scripture is if I come at it curious, it never gets boring.

**N.T Wright:** Yeah. Absolutely. Absolutely. I'll tell you, when I was bishop of Durham, which is 10, 15 years ago now, we had a lay course in the evenings through from like September to Easter or so for ordinary lay members of parishes. And many of the people who signed up were people who left school at 15, had never done any further education.

And at the end of that course, they would come to the place where I lived and we would have a little service and thank God for what they'd done, and have a cup of tea and this and that. One old lady who must have been nearer 80 than 70, she said to me, "You know, Bishop, I've discovered something, once you get into this stuff, you'll never be bored again as long as you live." And I thought, yes. She's this old lady who otherwise might be sunk in front of a soap opera on the telly and tedious life just dwindling along, and instead, there's all this stuff to get into.

**Annie:** Yes. I have to tell you, one of my most profound experiences with God happened at the cathedral at Durham.

**N.T Wright:** Oh, really?

**Annie:** Yeah. A couple of years ago I was there for Evensong on Epiphany, and I'm sitting... You know, it's shaped like a cross. So I'm up in those front chairs-

**N.T Wright:** Sure, sure.

**Annie:** ...and there's a little choir there. I'll tell you this quickly, but it's so sweet. And the Bishop was praying for different groups of people. And he says... and I was getting ready to start writing a new book. And he says, "Let's pray for this group and this group, and then for anyone who writes or speaks on behalf of the gospel." And I just start sobbing.

**N.T Wright:** Wow.

**Annie:** I start sobbing.

**N.T Wright:** Wow.

**Annie:** And he prays. And then the next one's like, for people who are grieving. And I was like, what? You're so specific. So afterwards I walk up to him and I start to say, "I'm a writer," and he says, "It's you," like that. And I said-

**N.T Wright:** Wonderful.

**Annie:** "Yes, sir." And he said, "I've had that for weeks and I knew it was for tonight."

**N.T Wright:** Wonderful.

**Annie:** My book is called Remember God, and on the cover is the design from his robe.

**N.T Wright:** Oh.

**Annie:** It's on the cover.

**N.T Wright:** Oh, that's wonderful. That's wonderful.

**Annie:** So that place is very dear to me because I feel like the Lord intercepted me.

**N.T Wright:** It's a very special place. I grew up in the northeast of England, so I've known Durham since I was a boy. And then when I went to be bishop there, that was like, Oh my goodness, doesn't get any better than this. One time my older daughter who

was then very much a city kid in her 20s with lots of very secular friends, they all came up and stayed in our extraordinary old house. And because it was a wet weekend, they said, "Well, let's go and see Durham. These girls have never seen Durham."

And my daughter had said to me, "Now, dad, when they come back, they're not churchgoers, so let's not have any of that sort of conversation. They just want to... whatever." They went off and they spent an hour or so in Durham Cathedral, and the choir was practicing for Evensong, and one of these girls, a sort of, you know, cheerful city girl came out in floods of tears and didn't know why.

**Annie:** Wow.

**N.T Wright:** Had no idea what was going on. So they came back home and my daughter said, "Actually, Dad, we have some questions." The building and the music will do that.

**Annie:** Is there something specific about what God has done in Durham throughout history that makes it so thick still?

**N.T Wright:** It's thick or... well, I mean, in the Celtic language, they call it a thin place. In other words, a place where the border between heaven and earth is porous.

**Annie:** It feels that way there.

**N.T Wright:** And Durham is like that Lindisfarne. I mean, when people pray in a building for a thousand years... and it's not magic, you can't sort of assume it's gonna happen. But again, and again and again, something is going on there. You know, one of the last times I was in there, I mean, talking about family, I had this extraordinary sense because my older son was then the conductor of the Durham Singers, which is one of the leading amateur choirs in the Northeast England. His final concert after 15 years of conducting that they did Bach's Christmas Oratorio.

**Annie:** Oh, wow.

**N.T Wright:** I sat there 10 pews back thinking, He is actually developing my ministry in this place in his own way. It's just the most amazing sense, memory and gratitude and so on.

**Annie:** Yeah. That place is... it will matter to me forever.

**N.T Wright:** Good. Good, good.

**Annie:** Which is one of those thin places is exactly right. It's one of those really... My other favorite thing that the Celtic people say is when they call the Holy Spirit a wild goose.

**N.T Wright:** Oh, yes, yes, yes.

**Annie:** That following the Holy Spirit is like a wild goose chase.

**N.T Wright:** Yes, absolutely.

**Annie:** I find that so... I mean, that's the same curiosity, right?

**N.T Wright:** Yeah.

**Annie:** If we're sitting in scripture to go, this may feel like a wild goose chase, but go.

**N.T Wright:** The wind blows where it wills and you hear the sound of it. Interesting.

**Annie:** It's beautiful. So Romans 8, when you're digging into this—this is gonna be a very elementary question—Paul didn't number the chapters.

**N.T Wright:** No.

**Annie:** Paul didn't number the verses. So when we're talking about the paragraphs like that, if we're talking about a wild goose chase, I mean, he's just left right, and center throughout that whole book. How did someone separate it into chapters and verses?

**N.T Wright:** That happened in the Middle Ages, simply as a way for monks to study it and to be able to know easily which bit they were talking about. Because you know, when Jesus refers to scripture He says something about Moses in the passage about the bush. And that's how they would do it. Do you remember that bit about the call of Abraham or the bit about the burning bush?

**Annie:** Chapter four, verses twelve.

**N.T Wright:** Right, exactly. But I mean, Paul, of all the New Testament writers, usually does write in paragraphs. He sometimes has more extended discussions. For instance, 1 Corinthians 15, the long chapter on the resurrection, though, even there we can see. And it's very definitely. You can feel him taking a breath.

In the early manuscripts, there are not only no spaces between and between words and no punctuation, and often no spaces between sentences either. But sometimes in some of the early manuscripts, you do have a little bit of a space where we would

probably put a paragraph. And that's because that's just the way they wrote it and they would read it straight through. It's fascinating actually, when you look at the photographs of these sort of third and fourth-century manuscripts.

So for Paul, you can tell, I mean, most obviously at the end of Romans 8, it's builds up to this climax. Nothing in all creation can separate us, and then he starts off "I'm speaking the truth in Christ. And I'm not lying, my conscience bears me witness that I'm constantly in sorrow and tearful because of my kinsmen according to the flesh." Now the transition between eight and nine, and it's rhetorically very, very powerful, and he knows that. I mean, he's planned this out. Romans is a symphony in four movements, and he's been thinking of these themes and how they are rounded off, and then a bit of them reappears in a different guise. It's extraordinary stuff.

**Annie:** Brilliant.

**N.T Wright:** Yeah, it is.

**Annie:** You know, when we think about writing letters, we think, "Dear Tom. Hope you're doing well. Thanks for being... Love, Annie." I'm imagining when you're talking about the four symphonies and the movement of it, he probably worked on it the way we work on books.

**N.T Wright:** Well, I think for Romans, yes. I think sometimes we sense that things are more jerky. I mean, 2 Corinthians is very awkward and jerky. He's just had a really, really rough time in Ephesus, he says he despaired of life itself. And you can feel this is somebody who's been through the mill and is grinding stuff out and then changing. And then I got to try, but I didn't find Titus, so I was still upset. And now I'm here and this has happened.

It's totally different. Totally different from 1 Corinthians and totally different from Romans. But I think he writes Romans maybe some months after he writes 2 Corinthians, because he's gone down to Corinth by then, and I think he is now planning his trip to Jerusalem, and then he hopes on to Rome. Of course, it took him much longer because he got put in prison, etc., etc.

**N.T Wright:** But I think he's had Romans bubbling up in his mind. I think he's been sorting it out. I mean, as a writer, I know there are some books which have just happened almost overnight. Like the one about the pandemic. I didn't intend to write that, but just happened.

But other books that I've been mulling over for literally years or even decades, and finally, okay, it's taken shape, I can see now how we're doing this. And sometimes



I've sat down with a research assistant or whoever, and we've covered a huge table with scribbles and maps, and diagrams. And then you say, oh, wait a minute, if we put that bit there, then we could deal with this issue there and it would work like this, and then there's a sort of sense of a jigsaw coming together. And I think it must've been like that with Paul, you know, obviously in his own way. But his mind is so extraordinary that he can keep these themes in balance.

**Annie:** Yeah. As you're explaining it, and as I read *Into the Heart of Romans*, I thought, oh, yeah, he made a jigsaw puzzle out of it and did the thing of, okay, this has to come here in order, and then I'm gonna say therefore, or whatever. I'm gonna say "therefore" because I need people to know that that ties to that

**N.T Wright:** Absolutely.

**Annie:** Brilliant.

**N.T Wright:** Absolutely. It's not just another idea that happens to occur to him on the spur of the moment.

**Annie:** That's right. One begets the other, like he has keep it in line. Oh, I'm telling you, you are healing my friendship with him.

[00:32:17] <Music>

**Sponsor:** Hey friends! Just interrupting this conversation one more time to share about one of our new amazing partners, [Bite Toothpaste](#). Did you know, oh boy, that we swallow five to 7% of our toothpaste every single time we brush our teeth? That's like an entire blob of toothpaste every seven days, you guys. Oh boy.

Here's where that gets tricky. Most commercial toothpastes have harsh chemicals, artificial flavors, and preservatives in them, which just isn't the best for us. But you've got to give Bite Toothpaste a try. They make these dry toothpaste tablets that are made with clean ingredients and are sulfate-free, palm oil-free, and glycerin-free.

They're called Bite Toothpaste bits. And they're so convenient. You just pop in a bit in your mouth, chew it up, and start brushing, it will turn to paste just like you're used to, but with no plastic tube or mess.

They also come in refillable glass jars, and they send refills and compostable pouches so they're better for our bodies and our earth. Bite actually makes plastic-free alternatives for everything at your bathroom sink, toothpaste,

mouthwash, toothbrushes, deodorants. So you can cut out the harsh chemicals and plastic waste without compromise.

Bite is offering our listeners 20% off your first order. So go to [trybite.com/thatsoundsfun](https://trybite.com/thatsoundsfun) or use the code THATSOUNDSFUN at checkout to claim this deal. That's [trybite.com/thatsoundsfun](https://trybite.com/thatsoundsfun). I cannot wait to hear what you think about it.

**Sponsor:** And one more amazing partner I get to tell you about, [Shopify](https://Shopify). Okay. If you're dreaming up plans to sell your own merch or custom goods in 2024, Shopify is the way to go, y'all. Whether you're making candles or screenprinting t-shirts, we are here for it, and so is Shopify.

They're the global commerce platform that helps you sell at every stage of your business, from the launch your online shop stage to the first real life sales stage to your store to did we just hit a million orders stage, whether you're selling scented soap or offering cute sweatshirts, Shopify helps you sell everywhere.

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Okay, now back to finish up this super interesting conversation with Dr. N.T. Wright.

[00:34:53] <Music>

**Annie:** One of the things you talk about... If you don't mind, I'll just read it to you.

**N.T Wright:** Sure, of course. Of course.

**Annie:** You said, "We note that this holiness is part of hope." So you're talking about the importance of holiness and how sometimes in our culture, we've let go of it. And then you're like, but in order to actually live with hope, you have to be an integrated person. And in my own Annie life, I sense like, oh yeah, the longer I have pursued Christ and gotten my life integrated and worked in my mental health, the more I've had hope. I just never connected that there was holiness connected to that.

**N.T Wright:** I mean, the thing about Christian holiness is when we have... particularly this is in Protestantism because we've been so worried about justification by works, as though anything that I do could commend me to God. So we've pushed the idea of behavior down to the end of the theological argument, as it were. So we talk about creation and humans and sin and, and salvation and God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit. And somewhere down at the back, maybe we'll have a little word about the church or about ethics.

But actually in the New Testament, the point is what the gospel does to us is creates us as renewed human beings, and this is against the day when God will raise us from the dead as part of His new creation. And holiness in the present is the advance symptom almost of the new humanity, which will be raised from the dead at the end.

**N.T Wright:** So it is bound to be a sign of hope because it wouldn't be happening if that wasn't what God intended to do overall. And once you see what we've called ethics like that, you see it completely differently. And there's no sense that this is me trying to impress God by doing a few good works on the side. It's simply, you are called to be a genuine renewed human.

Now, here's what it might look like. Then let's get on with it. And if you behave in these ways, you are saying, I don't want to be a new human, I'm just happy with the old model, thank you very much, even if it ends in dust and ashes.

**Annie:** That's right. That's right. I think so many people, especially in Advent during Christmas season, are looking for hope.

**N.T Wright:** Of course. Of course.

**Annie:** And your invitation, really throughout *Into the Heart of Romans*, the invitation was, when you pursue God and pursue holiness, hope bubbles up as part of the bonus.

**N.T Wright:** Yeah. Yeah. Well, quite. And Paul says... he has this odd phrase "we are saved in hope". Then he says, "hope that is seen is not hope for who hopes for what they see. But if we hope for what we don't see, we wait for it with patience". So the bubbling up generates a context within which patients, actually though we all find it hard, is nevertheless appropriate. And that's when we then talk about the lament and the groaning of creation and our groaning within that.

**Annie:** Yes. Oh, man. So *Into the Heart of Romans* feels like the book that we put on everyone's Christmas list that's like ready to dig a little deeper. And then you also

have *The New Testament for Everyone*, which is your translation of the whole New Testament.

**N.T Wright:** Yeah.

**Annie:** I mean, well done. Something I'm not gonna do. Well done. We love talking about the gospels around here. So in your translation... when we talked to Dr. Scot McKnight, he talked about Matthew, and he said, Matthew was so thoughtful and so meticulous that each chapter's about a page because he was trying to fit it all on one page. So which of the gospels is your favorite?

**N.T Wright:** Oh, goodness.

**Annie:** Do you have one that's your favorite?

**N.T Wright:** It's like asking which of my children is my favorite. This is not a good question to ask. I move. You know, I just recently did a whole course on Matthew for my online courses, which I do. And it was quite a while since I'd done anything on Matthew. So I was kind of dragging my feet a bit and thinking, how am I gonna get back in? And then when I finally sat down and spread Matthew out and started making a big map of it and so on, it was just so exciting. All these things which are bubbling up.

So there's still a bit of me, which is there. And Scot McKnight's an old friend of mine, so I appreciate what he says. But I mean, the thing about Mark, which struck me when I think, you know, this translation grows out of my little guides to the New Testament series, *Matthew for Everyone* and *Mark for Everyone*, etc. Because when we were plotting that, the publishers and I back in, when was it? I don't know, 1999, I think so long time ago now, the aim was to have about a thousand words of commentary on each paragraph in the New Testament.

**Annie:** Oh, wow.

**N.T Wright:** Which is not that much granted what's in them. And with a little illustration at the beginning to get people going. And then we said, "Well, do we want to print the New Testament with that or not?" And the answer was, well, yes, we do, because we envisage the sort of people who use these, everyone commentaries will be like on the train going to work or whatever, and they won't want to have a Bible on one knee and the book on the other while they're commuter train or whatever. So we gotta have the text as well as the commentary.

So then the question, which version are we gonna have? And then I immediately thought, well, whichever of the modern ones we choose, fairly soon I'm gonna be

saying, unfortunately, the NRSV gets this slightly out of kilter or whatever. And if it's the NIV, a lot out of kilter. So I said rationally to the publisher, "Maybe I should do my own. He said, "Great idea. Yes. Then I thought, what have I done?"

**Annie:** What have I agreed to?

**N.T Wright:** Wow. I did Mark first and then Luke. For some reason, we decided on that. And I remember when I'd done Mark and Luke thinking, I'm like, "Somebody that's decided to row across the Atlantic, and I've just left Liverpool and I'm somewhere on the south of Ireland. There's a long way to go yet.

But I realized then I was determined to keep it as close. It's not a paraphrase, it's a full-on translation. But it's possible to be accurate at one level, but to be completely inaccurate at another level, because Mark say, Mark is written at a run. It's very exciting. Immediately he did this, then he went and did that so fast. Bang, bang, bang, bang.

So I thought, if I did an accurate translation, but made it sound boring, that is about as inaccurate as it could be. So I was determined to try to embody the feel as well as the literal meaning. So for Mark, it's very breathless, and off we go. Luke is much more stately, you know.

**Annie:** Lovely.

**N.T Wright:** Dear Theophilus, this is what I'm doing, blah, blah, blah. And John is like visionary. "In the beginning was the word..." I mean, that was actually hard to translate the first paragraph of John because it's so enormous.

**Annie:** As we've read Let's Read the Gospels, John 1 through 3 and Luke 15 have been my favorite to read

**N.T Wright:** Luke 15. Interesting.

**Annie:** I've just loved it. And John 1 through 3, we realized—we started 2023 that way, we're starting 2024 that way—it says everything. If you hear John 1 through 3 on January 1st and you bail on the rest of the year, you've heard everything. Right?

**N.T Wright:** Yeah.

**Annie:** It's just amazing.

**N.T Wright:** Yeah. I mean, I tell the students that John 1:1-18, which is the prologue, you've got all Genesis there, you've got all Exodus there, because it ends with the word

tabernacle in our midst, which is the story of Genesis. The first great sort of super paragraph of the Old Testament runs from Genesis 1 and 2 to Exodus 40, where God builds this Tabernacle or Moses builds it under God's instructions, and God comes to live there. And this is the whole thing about the purpose of the Bible is not how we get up to God, it's how God wants to come and live with us. And the tabernacle is the foretaste of that. And that's all there in John 1:1-18. And it's Jesus, and then it's the Holy Spirit. And as you say, once you've got that, everything else fits in.

**Annie:** That's why we've said, every year, let's start with John 1 through 3. And if people bail... Everybody wants to plan on January 1, they want to read the Bible this year. So if we get them with the first three of John, that's it.

**N.T Wright:** Reading the Bible in a year is an excellent thing to be doing.

**Annie:** So next year what we're gonna do on Let's Read the Gospels is we're actually gonna slow. We've done three chapters a day and gotten through all four books every month.

**N.T Wright:** Great. Great.

**Annie:** So this year and in 2024, what we're gonna do is we're gonna slow down January, February, March, and do a chapter a day.

**N.T Wright:** Okay.

**Annie:** Will you talk a little bit about it's gonna take less time, which people like. They like that it's gonna be five to seven minutes. But what should we do in our minds as we're only hearing a chapter a day?

**N.T Wright:** It's tricky. It depends entirely where you're coming from. You know, if somebody's coming to this completely fresh, which I guess some people still are, then one would just be listening out for, what are the highlights? What's grabbing me, what jumps out at me from this text?

But for somebody who knows it all already, I would be thinking, try to look sideways and look back to the Old Testament, look forwards to what you know is coming up, and see where the coordinates are. And then particularly it's where are you in this text? I mean, that's the old so-called Ignatian Method of meditation, where here's a biblical story, imagine yourself as a bystander watching as Jesus is chatting to the woman from Samaria, or the woman whose son is about to be buried in Luke 7, whatever. Be a bystander in this story.

And then give yourself the space to wait and see if Jesus has a word for you in this, you know, beckon you in from the shadows as it were. And there are many, many ways of doing this. But to try to make it your own by making yourself part of the story is a really important thing. But I think that the whole sweep, whether it's a chapter or three chapters, or a whole book at a time... I mean, I remember one time we had an actor who was going around doing this came to the college where I was chaplain in Oxford, and he did the whole of John one evening. And he was-

**Annie:** Like performed it?

**N.T Wright:** He performed it. And we'd been having a sermon series on John all term, so we were kind of primed for it. And he did it in two halves, splitting at the end of chapter 10, so the second half starts with the raising of Lazarus. And it's absolutely heart-stopping stuff. You know, when you-

**Annie:** You're probably sobbing at the end.

**N.T Wright:** Well, you feel the whole story, and it picks you up and takes you places.

**Annie:** So when you think about eternity, was put-

**N.T Wright:** About what?

**Annie:** About eternity. Is that not even a word we can...? I know I haven't read Surprised My Hope, help me. I'm thinking about... because the question is-

**N.T Wright:** The ultimate future that God has in mind?

**Annie:** That's it.

**N.T Wright:** Would that be all right for you?

**Annie:** Yes, sir. Who are you most excited to be friends with besides Jesus?

**N.T Wright:** Well, obviously Paul. I suspect people say, what questions will you have for Paul? And my normal answer would be, the point is, what questions will Paul have for me? Like, how did you manage to misunderstand what I was doing there? I suspect that Paul will go on being a demanding friend. But yeah, yeah, that is a good question because the ultimate future is very Jesus-shaped.

Though we are told in 1 Thessalonians 4 that we won't be separated from those we have loved and lost, there's very little in the New Testament which says anything about in the world to come, you will be reunited with these people. It's very much

God, Jesus, and the Spirit focused. And it's very much about, not about who will we want to go and hang out with, but what new tasks will God have for us?

I've often said to people, in Revelation 5, when you have the song of praise for the lion who is also the lamb, because he's rescued us, it isn't He's rescued us so that we can then go to heaven and hang out and do nothing forever. He's rescued us in order to be the royal priesthood, which is the genuine human vocation of reflecting God's wisdom into the world and reflecting the praises of the world back to God. Now, that's a vocation and a half. Are we ready for that?

Now, there will be companions on the way, lots and lots of them, and that will be marvelous, but it's the vocation which is drawing us forward, which obviously is what we're talking about in Romans 8 as well. I think about it so much because I think, will I have a podcast in the continued work the Lord would have for me into forever? I'm like, how is this skillset gonna play out forever?

**N.T Wright:** Sure. Sure. And that's really important. End of 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says, What you do in the Lord is not in vain. In other words, all the stuff you do in Christ and by the Spirit here, we are not oiling the wheels of a machine that's going to fall off a cliff. We are somehow, in ways we don't appreciate at the moment, doing things which will, in God's new world, have a whole new dimension, a whole new place. That's so important and so exciting.

**Annie:** Yes, it's so exciting. It just makes it feel like everything we're putting our hands to here just doesn't conclude.

**N.T Wright:** Exactly.

**Annie:** And it isn't just about getting other people saved, though we hope.

**N.T Wright:** Exactly. And the point about eternity, to square that one off, the Bible, I don't think, envisages a timeless eternity. That's a Platonic idea. One of the main tasks we've got to do in our generation is to get rid of Plato out of this picture. He crept in by the fourth century because the philosophers who were teaching the church wanted to make it make sense within the Greek world. But for Plato the aim of the game is, as I say, we come from heaven and we've got to get back there.

You go to the first century looking for somebody who says that, you know who we're talking about? Plutarch. Not Paul. Plutarch is a pagan philosopher and biographer, very highly intellectual. He's a priest of the shrine at Delphi. He has a whole book talking about exile and explains that our souls are exiled from their true home in heaven, that's where we want to go back to. When I read that, I thought, that's what most of my friends think Christianity is all about. But it isn't.



Christianity is about the new world which God has already begun to make in Jesus, launching it in Jesus' resurrection, energizing it by the Spirit, and saying, come on, you're part of this, let's go.

**Annie:** Oh, that's fun. Okay, the last question we always ask, it is a left turn, so prepare yourself, because the show is called That Sounds Fun, Tom, you've got to tell us, what do you do for fun, too?

**N.T Wright:** Oh, for fun, I listen to music. I love music, as you may detect from most of the books I write. I've got musical illustrations here and there. We are very fortunate we live right in the middle of Oxford. We live about three or four hundred yards from the Sheldonian Theatre, where there are symphony concerts and so on.

I used to play golf. When we left Scotland four years ago, it was then the pandemic, and then after the pandemic I got long COVID, my hands all swelled up, so I haven't played golf for four years, and I'm really looking forward to getting back to it, if my body will allow me to.

**Annie:** That's right. Man, getting to live in St. Andrews and play at St. Andrews.

**N.T Wright:** Well, I did that for ten years. But yeah. My wife and I have got a little place we're building on the west coast of Scotland, just around the corner from a nice little nine-hole golf course, so I'm looking forward. You know, I'm semi-retired now, I'm an old man, but this is the sort of thing old guys do.

**Annie:** Semi-retired and then wrote *Into the Heart of Romans* as a semi-retired, and you redid The New Testament for Everybody. If I can be semi-retired like that, Tom, I will be very pleased. Thank you so much.

**N.T Wright:** Oh, thank you.

**Annie:** Thank you for your work and the way you invite us to love Jesus with our minds.

**N.T Wright:** Thank you. That's really important.

**Annie:** It is such a gift you've given me and so many of our friends listening. So I'm really grateful.

**N.T Wright:** Thank you very much.

[00:50:18] <Music>

**Outro:** Oh, you guys, isn't he brilliant? I know. My gosh, I feel so lucky that we get to talk to people like Dr. Wright. Wow. Okay, go grab a copy of *Into the Heart of Romans*. Go follow him on social media, tell Dr. Wright, thank you so much for being on the show.

And if you haven't heard, we are still reading the Gospels together in 2024 over on Let's Read the Gospels podcast. If you didn't join us in 2023, if you joined us part of the way, if you did it every day, go ahead and subscribe to that podcast. Come join us as we read one chapter a day from January through March. And download the free reading plan at [anniefdowns.com/gospels](http://anniefdowns.com/gospels). You'll recognize it. It has a different cover than everything from 2023. So [Anniefdowns.com/gospels](http://Anniefdowns.com/gospels). That reading plan is free.

If you need anything else from me, you know I'm embarrassingly easy to find. Annie F. Downs on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook. Anywhere you need me, that's where you can find me.

I think that's it for me today, friends. Go out or stay home, do something that sounds fun to you, and I will do the same. Today, what sounds fun to me... Well, this is our first day off of work from Christmas, so I cannot wait to lay around. I'm just going to lay around. That's my plan.

Y'all have a great weekend, great pre-Christmas weekend. Just to remind you, about the rest of the year, our buddy Eddie Kaufholz will be back on the Thursday after that to recap the year and talk about a hundred other things. You know how we do. Y'all have a great weekend. Merry Christmas. We'll see you back here on Christmas Eve.

**Paula:** Hey, everybody, this is Paula Faris from The Paula Faris Show, and one of my favorite holiday treats is my mom's shrimp cheese ball. Hang with me. I know it's a little weird. I'm not a sweet girl. I love savory things. And my mom would make the most amazing shrimp cheese ball every Christmas Eve. And it reminds me of home and the holidays.

**Havilah:** Hi, this is Havilah podcast, and my favorite holiday snack goes way back in the childhood when my grandmother taught me how to make magic bars. You know what that is. The crispy graham cracker crust with the chocolate chips and the walnuts and OMG, all those things with a drizzle of sweetened condensed milk on the top, I'm telling you, it is Christmas in your mouth. You're welcome.