

December 22, 2012

Christmas Holidays

God's Divine Purpose and Plan

As much of the Christian world turns their thoughts to the meaning of Christmas at this time of year I have personally been focusing on one of my own favorite sections of scripture in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians that sets forth God's entire plan of salvation from its conception in Christ before the creation of the world until its final completion through God's actual redemptive work in Christ:

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. 4 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption to sonship[c] through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace 8 that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, 9 he[d] made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, 10 to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under [in] Christ.

11 In him we were also chosen,[e] having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, 12 in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. 13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1:3-11).

It is important to remember that "the good tidings of great joy" regarding the coming of Christ into the world was preeminently the fulfillment of God's own plan of salvation which he purposed "for our glory, before the beginning of time" (I Cor. 2:7; Titus 1:2). Indeed, God predestined this plan to be fulfilled "in Christ" long "before the creation of the world" (Eph. 1:4; II Tim. 1:9-10). Through God's actual acts of creation and the events of the Old Testament God then guided his plan to the fulfillment of its purpose in historical "real-time" through the sending of his Son into the world and then through the actual redemptive work of Christ. As Paul's Letter to the Galatians so beautifully states:

"But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.' So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you an heir." (Gal. 4:4-7)

Though the fullness of God's plan will not be brought to completion until after the second coming of Christ - which not even Christ, but only God knows the time of - its realization has already begun in the present time "for those who love him" (Rom. 8:28; I Cor. 2:7-10). In fact, for those who through faith in

Christ are "in Christ" the firstfruits of the Spirit mark the beginning of the life of the age to come - a life that proceeds, despite the sufferings of this world, from glory to glory culminating in the return of Christ. Thus,

"If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old is gone and the new is here!" (II Cor. 5:17). It's full culmination when all of creation will set free from its "bondage to decay" and enjoy "the freedom and glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:18-25) awaits only the second coming of Christ which, "God will bring about in his own time" according to his own set purpose and plan (I Tim. 6:13-16; Eph. 1:11-14).

All of this indicates the over-arching sovereignty, loving purpose, and wise plan of God that began before the creation of the world, has been working behind the scenes through historical times, and will ultimately reach its ultimate culmination in, and through, the redemptive work of God's Son. As the scriptures overwhelmingly show the world did not come into existence accidentally nor were its problems unforeseen by God. Instead, God's plan of redemption and salvation is itself the basis for the creation of the world and God has, is, and will continue to guide it to its final fulfillment in such a way that God's children will indeed ultimately see that "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18). This is the promise and hope of Christianity and it is ultimately the message of Christmas itself. Despite what the world at large might have us believe, there is in fact a God directed divine purpose at work from before the beginning of time, at present in historical time, and indefinitely into the future. In this divine purpose and plan the people of God "in Christ" can rest assured that no matter what happens in this world, that

"neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39).

This is indeed good news! May we rejoice in it during this holiday season - and, throughout the year!

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November 22, 2012

Thanksgiving Day in America

Today is the American holiday of Thanksgiving and I wanted to send out a message of thanks to all of you for the joy of sharing in your life as we endeavor to live and serve together as children in God's family and members of the body of Christ. A couple of weeks ago I put up a new post on our website which I began to write on Reformation Sunday. Today, I am reminded that the "Pilgrims" who celebrated the first American Thanksgiving were very much children of the Reformation who were so dedicated to their faith that they were willing to endure the hardships of coming to America and establishing a colony

in Plymouth on the northeastern seaboard of America. We can certainly debate some of the finer points of their particular interpretation of both their Calvinist faith and practice; however, their dedication and commitment to their God and to the care of each other is beyond question and continues to stand as a great example to dedicated Christians everywhere. As my good friend Chuck LaMattina reminds me, the Pilgrims considered themselves to be but stepping stones in the work of promoting Christ's kingdom in the new world. Others would build on the work they had begun. Let us, in fact, quote the words of their leader William Bradford himself from his famous journal "Of Plymouth Plantation". Looking back on their times as he writes Bradford states,

"Last and not least, they [the Pilgrims] cherished a great hope and inward zeal of laying good foundations, or at least making some ways toward it, for the propagation and advance of the gospel of the kingdom of Christ in the remote parts of the world, even though they should be but stepping stones to others in the performance of so great a work."

But not only were they committed to their God and his work, they also set the foundation and pattern via the Mayflower Compact for the future development of American - and other nations' - self-government all the way down to this day. All of us who meet in our own self-governing churches as well as live under the civic freedoms of our self-governing institutions of government today are heirs of the heritage they promoted.

May we all thank God for the many blessings he has given us both spiritually as his children and in so many areas of life on this special day. And here, with the Apostle Paul, is my prayer of thanksgiving for you all, my faithful brothers and sisters in Christ:

"I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God." (Phil. 1:3-11).

With much love and thankfulness in Christ,

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October 28, 2012

Reformation Sunday

It's been a few months since I last wrote on this blog. The reason for this is that this past summer I underwent (successful) heart surgery to correct a congenital heart problem and I've been recovering from that surgery ever since. Though no fun in itself, it did offer the opportunity of spending a lot more time than usual with my dear wife, Dorota, who took such incredibly good care of me the whole time. I also appreciate very much the prayers and many words of encouragement that I received from so many of you. Of course, I was also able to spend a good amount of time reading the Bible and some other books, etc. that I'd been wanting to get to for some time. And now, I'm also glad to be able pick up again with writing this blog on Reformation Sunday, the last Sunday of October. Though I won't finish my post today, nevertheless, this day has always been of great importance to me and it's nice to pause and think of its significance.

As with millions of other Christian believers I have benefited greatly from the courageous stand of those who led the Reformation starting with Martin Luther in 1517. In fact, I'm certainly qualified to be called a "child of the Reformation" since I grew up in the Presbyterian Church of the U.S.A. - a church which indirectly descended from John Calvin's unique contribution to the Reformation. It was in the Presbyterian church that I first learned, in some depth, the biblical principles that sparked and undergirded the Reformation. Indeed, it was in that church that I learned - and accepted as the basis for my Christian life - the most fundamental biblical principle of all that Martin Luther, John Calvin, and their Reformation colleagues boldly taught from the New Testament: that is, the simple and liberating truth of justification, and therefore, salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. This truth which stands as a beacon of light at the heart of the Christian gospel is the central truth of the Reformation just as it is the central truth of Christianity. That is why the Reformation is so important and that is why its effects were revolutionary to the people and institutions of its times. Paul's Letter to the Romans sets out the simple truths of this "good news" which, though at the center of New Testament truth, had been obscured for centuries during the Middle Ages until finally being recovered and brought back to the forefront of the Christian message by the leaders of the Reformation:

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.' "(Rom. 1:16-17 ESV).

"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." (Romans 3:21-26 ESV).

"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God." (Romans 5:1-2 ESV).

It was these verses in particular from Romans that changed the life of Martin Luther and set the stage for the dramatic events that would start the Reformation. We can let Luther tell his own story in his own famous words:

"I had greatly longed to understand Paul's Letter to the Romans, and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, "the righteousness of God", because I took it to mean that righteousness whereby God is righteous and acts righteously in punishing the unrighteous Night and day I pondered until ... I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, he justifies us by faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before "the righteousness of God" had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage became to me a gateway into heaven."

This dramatic experience of Luther's has been repeated many times since in the lives of those Christian believers who have come to understand the biblical truth of justification by faith. In fact, I remember the profound effect it had on my life in my teenage years as I began to understand it's truth and it has been the bedrock of my Christian faith ever since. Though I've grown and refined my beliefs and practice of the truths of Christianity over the last forty years, it is the biblical principle of justification by faith that has provided the sure compass for navigating through so much else in the quest for understanding biblical truth.

Of course, many Reformation leaders and followers were persecuted and even lost their lives in standing for and sharing this truth. This includes one of my personal favorites and certainly one of the most important of all - William Tyndale, who fathered the translation of the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into English and was persecuted and executed for it. Nevertheless, we have excellent versions of the Bible today in English thanks largely to his pioneering efforts. The major Reformation leaders should always be revered for the courage they had in recovering so many of the truths of the new covenant message. Nevertheless, the work they began was never completed and it continues to go on today. Indeed, many of the original Reformation churches hardened their own positions to the point that they actually persecuted those who disagreed with them, just as they themselves had been persecuted by the Roman Catholic church. Since that time many new churches and Christian movements have been formed in the spirit of the Reformation with the intent of continuing to teach and live the truths of original Christianity. These dedicated Christians have often been called "step-children" of the Reformation and, in their various groups have brought continual revitalization to the Christian Church through the years. Eventually, through many centuries and many often painful events, a general tolerance has taken hold in the world of Christianity and there is even a growing movement for cooperation amongst various Christians and Christian groups. Nevertheless, many today continue to feel the need to leave the increasingly secularizing, syncretizing and liberalizing mainline denominations for more biblically oriented churches, fellowships, and various non-denominational groups, etc.

I certainly understand this since I'm not only a "child" of the Reformation but also a "step-child" myself. I personally left the Presbyterian church that I grew up in just after finishing high school for a whole variety reasons - primarily, due to the fact that I believed that it was becoming less and less biblical in doctrine and practice as evidenced by the sermons, Sunday School lessons, and activities that I was hearing and experiencing. It was a painful departure and I still love and greatly respect many people from that church. However, I have no doubts that it was the right thing for me personally to do at that time. Since then, while I've primarily been involved in being a leader in the house-church movement over the last forty years, I've remained thankful for all that I learned in my original church as well as from other faithful Christians from across the Christian spectrum of groups no matter what denomination, church or fellowship that they may be involved in. As I emphasize in my own book "God's Plan of Salvation" it is the universal church of the body of Christ and the family of God that transcend earthly groups and institutions that are truly what count. Beyond that, each individual Christian has to work out the best church, fellowship, etc. for him or her to be a part of at any given time in their lives. And, of course, it is the primary goal of this web-site to help any Christian anywhere and in any church or group to grow in their own spiritual understanding and walk with God while also endeavoring "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

As to the subject of the Reformation I highly recommend:

1. The entire issue of Vol. 1 Issue 3 of The Unity of the Spirit from the Fall of 1995 from our Newsletter Archives
2. Two outstanding books by the great Reformation scholar Roland Bainton:
 - a. A wonderful biography of Martin Luther, Here I Stand, A Life of Martin Luther
 - b. An outstanding history of the Reformation, The Reformation of the 16th Century

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June 9, 2012

Graduation Day

The Meaning and Purpose of Life

I would like to congratulate all those whom we know who have graduated from high school and college over the recent days. In particular, I would especially like to congratulate the Woods Charter School Class of 2012 who graduated on Saturday June 9 near Chapel Hill, NC. It has been a special joy for me to have taught these students US and European history over these last few years as well to serve as one of their senior class advisors. In the 13 years that I've taught at Woods Charter School there is no group of whom I am more proud and I pray that God will guide them and bless them in the years ahead. It was a

great blessing for me to talk so personally with so many of them over the last couple of weeks and then to hear their comments at our senior dinner and, finally, their beautiful comments at the graduation ceremony. Almost all of these young men and women - without any prompting whatsoever - acknowledged first and foremost with great boldness and sincerity their thankfulness to God and/or to their families and to their teachers and school community for bringing them to this day - and this at a public school! May this sense of humility, thankfulness and these priorities remain in their lives and may their lives reflect a growing joy, peace and strength in living for God - in common with others who are striving for the same - in the midst of both the joyful opportunities and often difficult challenges of this life.

For the 13th year in a row I also had the honor and privilege of addressing the graduates, their families and the entire school community at this graduation ceremony. I began by referring to one of my favorite books - the Book of Ecclesiastes. In it the author - most likely King Solomon of ancient Israel - describes his earnest quest or search for the meaning and purpose of life. Backed by his kingly wealth, he searches high and low for wisdom and tries to experience anything that might offer some meaning to what often seems an unjust, contradictory, and even meaningless existence for mankind. At times he, like so many modern intellectuals, tends towards cynicism due to what can seem to be the futility of it all. Nowhere, however, does he say what is often heard at graduation ceremonies by the so-called best minds of our age: "have fun" or "follow your dreams"! Which, though good enough in their proper place, are hardly a basis for providing meaning and purpose to life. Instead, throughout Solomon's quest we are given glimpses of true godly wisdom as to the underlying and over-riding meaning of life until finally - at the very end - that meaning is set forth with clarity, dignity, and simplicity. It is a meaning that is not couched in high sounding intellectual and philosophical terms but rather in the common language understandable to all people who are genuinely seeking the true meaning and purpose of life.

In the following verses I will set forth one of my favorite passages from Ecclesiastes that I alluded to at the graduation ceremony and then we will proceed to Solomon's final conclusion - which I could not speak specifically about at the ceremony due to its religious nature - as to the true meaning and purpose of life:

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

a time to kill, and a time to heal;

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

a time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

a time to seek, and a time to lose;

a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

a time to tear, and a time to sew;

a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace."

"What gain has the worker from his toil? I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man.

I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear [have loving reverence] before him."

(Ecclesiastes 3:1-14)

Though these verses above set against the background of ancient Israelitic life in the midst of an agricultural society, much of what is said still pertains directly to our lives today. For example, "a time to be born and a time to die" were both experienced very vividly by the Woods Charter School community during the course of this past school year and no one can deny their reality or the seriousness with which they frame life. In fact, in the midst of all his searching Solomon himself finds and states some of the most profound truths of the Bible. Their simplicity, humility, and clarity span the whole and varied course of human life and place man in his proper role in his all important relationship to God - around which everything else in life revolves.

This sets the stage for further searching in his quest and, ultimately, foreshadows and prepares us for the simplicity and clarity of his final conclusion:

"Besides being wise, the Preacher [King Solomon] also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.

The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd. My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear [lovingly reverence] God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil."

(Ecclesiastes 12:9-14 ESV)

Though these words may grate against modern ideas of the centrality of the rights and prominence of man in today's world, they express the steadfast beliefs and world-view of the faithful people of God in the Old Testament kingdom of Israel. Their entire lives derived meaning from, and revolved around, their relationship with their one holy, righteous, and loving God who was himself sovereign over all and whose holy, just and righteous commandments were intended for the benefit and blessing of his people.

However, neither Solomon nor the entire Bible ever pretend that life is easy. Instead, contrary to popular belief, the Bible is the most realistic of all books. It shows life for what it really is in its blessings and difficulties and indicates that no person is exempt from experiencing its realities. However, what the Bible offers in a way that no other book, philosophy, or religion does is a way of living in accordance with the true meaning and purpose of life as set forth by God the creator. And, importantly, it promises a reward for godly living not only in this life but in a much greater life to come. Only recognition of this can set a person on the proper course of life and give true meaning and purpose to that life within mankind's proper relationship with God.

Today, living in the new covenant era of salvation, our relationship with God as his people has been greatly transformed by the redemptive work of Christ. However, the same basic truth of the meaning of life remains the same. Mankind was created in the image of God and it is only by living in proper relationship to God - now through faith in Christ with a corresponding Christ-like lifestyle - that mankind can find the true meaning and purpose of life. And, with an understanding of that meaning and purpose every great or mundane task takes on a greater meaning in relationship to God. May God guide and lead us in living for him in all of the many varied contexts of life in which we live in proper relationship with him.

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April 8, 2012

Resurrection Sunday or Easter 2012

On this Easter Sunday of 2012 we finish up our series on the writings of NT Wright with a superb article written on the meaning of Easter by Wright entitled "Christ is Risen from the Dead, the Firstfruits of those Who have Died". We hope you will take the time to read and study this outstanding article by Wright and may it be a blessing to your growth and walk with God:

http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Italian_Bishops_Christ_Risen_First_Fruits.htm

May God bless you all as we remember the significance of Christ's resurrection each and every day that we live!

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March 23, 2012

NT Wright: In His Own Words

As mentioned in the first post from this series (see below), NT Wright has written a commentary series on the entire New Testament especially designed to be accessible to everyone. The New Testament for Everyone series is an 18 volume set, but all of the titles are available individually as well. The idea behind these works is well stated in the Introduction:

"[The New Testament writings] were never meant for either a religious or intellectual elite. From the very beginning they were meant for everyone.

That is as true today as it was then. Of course, it matters that some people give time and care to the historical evidence, the meaning of the original words (the early Christians wrote in Greek), and the exact and particular force of what different writers were saying about God, Jesus, the world and themselves. This series is based quite closely on that sort of work. But the point of it all is that the message can get out to everyone, especially to people who wouldn't normally read a book with footnotes and Greek words in it. That's the sort of person for whom these books are written." [N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (Louisville, 2004), ix-x]

So here you have the work of one of the world's foremost Bible scholars (who is also a wonderfully skilled communicator), writing to make the gospel clear for all to understand. What a great idea!

What follows are quotations from the glossary, which can be found in all of the works and is specifically designed to explain certain key words that form the foundation upon which a proper understanding of the New Testament is built. Much of the body of the commentary is enlightening and enjoyable reading, but without the basic understanding of what the authors of the NT meant by the words they used, much can be missed. A lifetime of scholarly work devoted to understanding the original intent and meaning of the New Testament writings has, in the glossary of these books, been boiled down to its simplest form. Here we have some of our favorite entries:

covenant

At the heart of Jewish belief is the conviction that the one God, YHWH, who had made the whole world, had called Abraham and his family to belong to him in a special way. The promises God made to Abraham and his family, and the requirements that were laid on them as a result, came to be seen in terms either of the agreement that a king would make with a subject people, or of the marriage bond between husband and wife. One regular way of describing this relationship was 'covenant', which can thus include both promise and law. The covenant was renewed at Mount Sinai with the giving of the Torah; in Deuteronomy before the entry to the Promised Land; and, in a more focused way, with David (e.g. Psalm 89). Jeremiah 31 promised that after the punishment of exile God would make a 'new covenant' with his people, forgiving them and binding them to him more intimately. Jesus believed that this was coming true through his kingdom-proclamation and his death and resurrection. The early

Christians developed these ideas in various ways, believing that in Jesus the promises had at last been fulfilled.

[N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (Louisville, 2004), 228]

good news, gospel, message, word

The idea of 'good news', for which an older English word is 'gospel', had two principal meanings for first-century Jews. First, with roots in Isaiah, it meant the news of YHWH's long-awaited victory over evil and rescue of his people...Since for Jesus and Paul the announcement of God's inbreaking kingdom was both the fulfillment of prophecy and a challenge to the world's present rulers, 'gospel' became an important shorthand for both the message of Jesus himself and the apostolic message about him. Paul saw this message as itself the vehicle of God's saving power (Romans 1.16; 1 Thessalonians 2.13).

The four canonical 'gospels' tell the story of Jesus in such a way as to bring out both these aspects (unlike some other so-called 'gospels' circulated in the second and subsequent centuries, which tended both to cut off the scriptural and Jewish roots of Jesus' achievement and to inculcate a private spirituality rather than confrontation with the world's rulers). Since in Isaiah this creative, life-giving good news was seen as God's own powerful word (40.8; 55.11), the early Christians could use 'word' or 'message' as another shorthand for the basic Christian proclamation. [N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (Louisville, 2004), 231-232]

heaven

Heaven is God's dimension of the created order (Genesis 1.1; Psalm 115.16; Matthew 6.9), whereas 'earth' is the world of space, time and matter that we know. 'Heaven' thus sometimes stands, reverentially, for 'God' (as in Matthew's regular 'kingdom of heaven'). Normally hidden from human sight, heaven is occasionally revealed or unveiled so that people can see God's dimension of ordinary life (e.g. 2 Kings 6.17; Revelation 1, 4-5). Heaven in the New Testament is thus not usually seen as the place where God's people go after death; at the end, the New Jerusalem descends from heaven to earth, joining the two dimensions forever. 'Entering the kingdom of heaven' does not mean 'going to heaven after death', but belonging in the present to the people who steer their earthly course by the standards and purposes of heaven (cf. the Lord's Prayer: 'on earth as in heaven', Matthew 6.10), and who are assured of membership in the age to come. [N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (Louisville, 2004), 232]

holy spirit

In Genesis 1.2, the Spirit is God's presence and power within creation, without God being identified with creation. The same Spirit entered people, notably the prophets, enabling them to speak and act for God. At his baptism by John, Jesus was specially equipped with the Spirit, resulting in his remarkable public career (Acts 10:38). After his resurrection, his followers ere themselves filled (Acts 2) by the same Spirit,

now identified as Jesus' own Spirit: the creator God was acting afresh, remaking the world and them too. The Spirit enabled them to live out a holiness which the Torah could not, producing 'fruit' in their lives, giving them 'gifts' with which to serve God, the world and the church, and assuring them of future resurrection (Romans 8; Galatians 4-5; 1 Corinthians 12-14). [N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (Louisville, 2004), 232-233]

kingdom of God, kingdom of heaven

Best understood as the kingship, or sovereign and saving rule, of Israel's God YHWH, as celebrated in several Psalms (e.g. 99.1) and prophecies (e.g. Daniel 6.26f.). Because YHWH was the creator God, when he finally became king in the way he intended this would involve setting the world to rights, and particularly rescuing Israel from its enemies. 'Kingdom of God' and various equivalents (e.g. 'No king but God!') became revolutionary slogans around the time of Jesus. Jesus' own announcement of God's kingdom redefined these expectations around his own very different plan and vocation. His invitation to people to 'enter' the kingdom was a way of summoning them to allegiance to himself and his programme, seen as the start of God's long-awaited saving reign. For Jesus, the kingdom was coming not in a single move, but in stages, of which his own public career was one, his death and resurrection another, and a still future consummation another. Note that 'kingdom of heaven' is Matthew's preferred form for the same phrase, following a regular Jewish practice of saying 'heaven' rather than 'God'. It does not refer to a place ('heaven'), but to the fact of God's becoming king in a through Jesus and his achievement. Paul speaks of Jesus, as Messiah, already in possession of his kingdom, waiting to hand it over finally to the Father (1 Corinthians 15.23-8; cf. Ephesians 5.5). [N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (Louisville, 2004), 233-234]

life, soul, spirit

Ancient people held many different views about what made human beings the special creatures they are. Some, including many Jews, believed that to be complete, humans needed bodies as well as inner selves. Others, including many influenced by the philosophy of Plato (fourth century BC), believed that the important part of a human was the 'soul' (Gk: psyche), which at death would be happily freed from its bodily prison. Confusingly for us, the same word psyche is often used in the New Testament within a Jewish framework where it clearly means 'life' or 'true self', without implying a body/soul dualism that devalues the body. Human inwardness of experience and understanding can also be referred to as 'spirit'. [N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (Louisville, 2004), 234-234]

present age, age to come, eternal life

By the time of Jesus many Jewish thinkers divided history into two periods: 'the present age' and 'the age to come' – the latter being the time when YHWH would at last act decisively to judge evil, to rescue

Israel, and to create a new world of justice and peace. The early Christians believed that, though the full blessings of the coming age lay still in the future, it had already begun with Jesus, particularly with his death and resurrection, and that by faith and baptism they were able to enter it already. 'Eternal life' does not mean simply 'existence continuing without end', but 'the life of the age to come'. [N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (Louisville, 2004), 237]

resurrection

In most biblical thought, human bodies matter and are not merely disposable prisons for the soul. When ancient Israelites wrestled with the goodness and justice of YHWH, the creator, they ultimately came to insist that he must raise the dead (Isaiah 26.19; Daniel 12.2-3) – a suggestion firmly resisted by classical pagan thought...

...Only the bodily resurrection of Jesus explains the rise of the early church, particularly its belief in Jesus' messiahship (which his crucifixion would have called into question). The early Christians believed that they themselves would be raised to a new, transformed bodily life at the time of the Lord's return or parousia (e.g. Philippians 3:20f.). [N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (Louisville, 2004), 238-239]

YHWH

The ancient Israelite name for God, from at least the time of the Exodus (Exodus 6.2f.). It may originally have been pronounced 'Yahweh', but by the time of Jesus it was considered too holy to speak out loud, except for the high priest once a year in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. Instead, when reading scripture, pious Jews would say Adonai, 'Lord', marking this usage by adding the vowels of Adonai to the consonants of YHWH, eventually producing the hybrid 'Jehovah'. The word YHWH is formed from the verb 'to be', combining 'I am who I am', 'I will be who I will be', and perhaps 'I am because I am', emphasizing YHWH's sovereign creative power. [N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (Louisville, 2004), 242-243]

We hope you considering augmenting your Bible study with the use of these insightful books by NT Wright.

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March 15, 2012

NT Wright: In His Own Words

This week we offer a few highlights from the latest volume from the Christian Origins and the Question of God series, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (2003). It should be noted that this book is the largest and most detailed of the three in the series and offers much in the way of explaining the Jewish, Greco-Roman and other ancient civilizations' viewpoint on the question of 'What happens when we die?'. You will also find here a well reasoned argument in the second half of the book for the claim that the bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth stands as the central, undeniable truth undergirding the veracity of the entire New Testament message.

And now we present NT Wright from *The Resurrection of the Son of God*:

"...granted the wide range of views about life after death in general and resurrection in particular, what did the early Christians believe on these topics, and how can we account for their beliefs? We shall discover that, although the early Christians remained, in one sense, within the Jewish spectrum of opinion, their views on the subject had clarified and indeed crystallized to a degree unparalleled elsewhere in Judaism. The explanation they gave, for this and much besides, was the equally unparalleled claim that Jesus of Nazareth had himself been bodily raised from the dead...Despite what is sometimes suggested, we shall discover substantial unanimity on the basic point: virtually all the early Christians for whom we have solid evidence affirmed that Jesus of Nazareth had been bodily raised from the dead. When they said 'he was raised on the third day', they meant this literally. [N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, 2003), 9-10]

"The word 'immortality' is often taken to imply, not just that the humans in question happen to be in some sense still alive after their deaths, but that there always was within them, as for Plato, an immortal element, perhaps the soul, which is incapable of dying. But this, as we saw earlier, is not the view of those biblical writers who, it seems, came to believe that their relationship with YHWH would continue after their death. Such continuation was based solely on YHWH's character (as the loving, powerful creator), not on anything innate within human beings." [N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, 2003), 130]

"Granted that the early Christians drew freely on Jewish traditions, and engaged energetically with the pagan world of ideas, how does it happen that we find virtually no spectrum of belief about life after death, but instead an almost universal affirmation of that which pagans said could not happen, and that which one stream (albeit the dominant one) of Judaism insisted would happen, namely resurrection? Let us be quite clear at this point: we shall see that when the early Christians said 'resurrection' they meant it in the sense it bore both in paganism (which denied it) and in Judaism (an influential part of which affirmed it). 'Resurrection' did not mean that someone possessed 'a heavenly and exalted status'; when predicated of Jesus, it did not mean his 'perceived presence' in the ongoing church. Nor, if we are thinking historically, could it have meant 'the passage of the human Jesus into the power of God'. It meant bodily resurrection; and that is what the early Christians affirmed. There is nothing in the early Christian view of the promised future which corresponds to the pagan views we have studied; nothing at

all which corresponds to the denials of the Sadducees; virtually no hint of the 'disembodied bliss' view of some Jewish sources; no Sheol, no 'isles of the blessed', no 'shining like stars', but a constant affirmation of newly embodied life." [N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, 2003), 209-210]

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those in the Messiah, Jesus': Romans 8.1 has become one of Paul's most famous sentences... The 'condemnation' in question is the Adamic condemnation spoken of in 5.12-21, which in turn looks back to the condemnation of sin in 1.18-3.20. The reason this condemnation is taken away for those 'in the Messiah' is given in verses 2-11, with constant reference to the resurrection: God has done what the Torah could not do, condemning sin in the flesh of the Messiah, as the representative of all his people, and by his Spirit giving life, in the present in terms of a new orientation and mindset (8.5-8), in the ultimate future in terms of bodily resurrection...the one who accomplishes the resurrection, both of Jesus and of believer, is the living God himself, as Paul regularly insists; but the means by which he will accomplish it is the Spirit. The Spirit, here as throughout Paul's thought, is the present guarantee of the future inheritance, and of the body which will be appropriate for that new world...

...those who live 'in the Messiah', in the interval between his resurrection and their own, stand on resurrection ground. They 'set their mind on the Spirit', rather than on the flesh...As a result, they enjoy 'life and peace' in the present as well as the future...

Here, as in Philippians and elsewhere, the final resurrected state of the justified is described as 'glory'. By this Paul seems to mean, not luminosity, but the dignity, worth, honor and status that the Messiah's people will enjoy, sharing that of the Messiah himself, whose 'glory' is now that he is the world's true lord. As Paul said in 5.17, those who are his will share his kingly reign. This corresponds to the meaning of the request put by James and John to Jesus in Mark 10.37: they ask to sit at Jesus' right and left in his 'glory'. They do not imagine that they, or he, will be shining like torches; and indeed Matthew's version of the saying (20.21) has 'in your kingdom'. That is the point here: those who patiently walk through the present wilderness, being led by the Christian equivalent of the pillar of cloud and fire, in other words, by the Spirit, will eventually receive the 'inheritance'...

...It is true that, as in Philippians 3.20-21, 'glory' here is a characteristic of the risen body; but, again as in that passage, it is here also a function of it. The risen body will be 'glorious' in that it will no longer be subject to decay and death. But those who are raised will also enjoy 'glory' in the sense of new responsibilities within the new creation. This leads the eye towards the 'inheritance', the theme we met in Galatians 3 and 4 and Ephesians 1 and which now forms the main theme of verses 18-25. This part of Paul's larger picture of the world to come, the promised new age, focuses not so much on what sort of bodies those 'in Christ' will have in the resurrection, but on the sphere over which they will exercise their rule.

Verses 18-24 insist that the sphere in question is the whole renewed cosmos – and, indeed, that the cosmos will be renewed precisely through the agency of those who are thus raised from the dead to share the 'glory', that is, the kingly rule, of the Messiah. Paul is more precise in verse 21 than some of his translators: the creation itself, he says, will be set free from its bondage to decay 'unto the freedom of

the glory of the children of God'...The marginalization of this part of Romans 8 in much exegesis down the years has robbed Christian imagination of this extraordinary picture of the future; only by restoring it to its rightful place – which is, after all, in Paul's build-up to the climax of the central section of his most important letter! – can we understand the larger picture within which his vision of resurrection makes sense. It is a picture in which the corruption and futility of creation itself, created good but doomed to decay, is seen as a kind of slavery, so that creation itself, too, needs to experience its exodus, its liberation. And God's people, indwelt by the Spirit, find that they themselves, being in their own mortal bodies part of this same creation, groan in labour-pains as they await the birth of God's new world. The Spirit is, once again, the gift that indicates what the future holds, here seen in terms of the 'first-fruits' metaphor, the first sheaf of harvest offered as a sign of the larger crop still to come. The Spirit thus again provides an inauguration of the eschatological fulfillment, even in the present time... [N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, 2003), 255-258]

"The contrast between that which is seen and that which is not (2 Cor. 4.18a) could by itself, of course, come straight from Plato, and might imply a dualism in which physicality, present and future, was downgraded in favour of a non-physical world and human existence. But this ontological dualism is questioned in the second half of verse 18, and disproved entirely in 5.1-5. Verse 18b indicates that the contrast is actually an eschatological one: 'eternal', again, could be read platonically, but the following passage indicates that it has to do, as usual in Paul, with 'the age to come', over against the present evil age in which the apostle lives, whose evidences are visible all around. These things are only for a time, he says; the age to come will last." [N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, 2003), 366]

"Why then does Paul speak of the new body as being 'in the heavens'? Does this not mean that he thinks of Christians simply 'going to heaven' after their death? No. This is one of the passages [2 Cor. 5.1-4] which have supplied later tradition with the materials for an unwarranted Platonizing of Christian hope. As with Philippians 3.2-21, and indeed 1 Corinthians 15.47-9, the temptation of the tradition has been to drive a steamroller through what Paul actually says, clearing his careful words out of the way to make room for a different worldview in which the aim of Christian faith is 'to go to heaven when you die'. The tradition has always found it difficult to incorporate 'resurrection', in any Jewish or early Christian sense, into that scenario, which is perhaps why orthodox Christianity has found it hard to respond to secular modernity at this point. 'Heaven' for Paul, here as elsewhere, is not so much where people go after they die – he remains remarkably silent on that, with the possible exception of Colossians 3.3-4 – but the place where the divinely intended future for the world is kept safely in store, against the day when, like new props being brought out from the wings and onto stage, it will come to birth in the renewed world, 'on earth as in heaven'. If I assure my guests that there is champagne for them in the fridge I am not suggesting that we all need to get into the fridge if we are to have the party. The future body, the non-corruptible (and hence 'eternal') 'house', is at present 'in the heavens' as opposed to 'on earth' (epigeios) (5.1); but it will not stay there. For us to put it on top of our present 'house', (clothes, bodies, houses, temples and tents; why mix two metaphors if four or five will do?) will require that it be brought from heaven (5.2). This is a key passage not only for understanding Paul but

for grasping similar language elsewhere in the New Testament.” [N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, 2003), 367-368]

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NT Wright: In His Own Words

As a continuation of our presentation of some of the best that NT Wright has to offer, we now present extensive quotes from the second book in the *Christian Origins and the Question of God* series, *Jesus and the Victory of God*. This is, once again, a detailed study that may not be suitable for all, but the insights contained herein are worthwhile of further reflection.

We hope you find useful these excerpts from NT Wright's views on:

The Gospels

“The fact that Jesus was an itinerant prophet meant, clearly, that he went from village to village, saying substantially the same things wherever he went. Local variations would no doubt abound. Novelty would spring up in response to a new situation, or a sharp question or challenge. But the historical likelihood – and it is very likely indeed -- is that if he told a parable once he told it dozens of times, probably with minor variations; that if he gave a list of (what we call) ‘beatitudes’ once, he gave such a list, probably with minor variations, dozens of times; that he had regular phrases with which he urged repentance, commended faith, encouraged the desperate, rebuked those he considered hard-hearted, spoke words of healing...

...Within the peasant oral culture of his day, Jesus must have left behind him, not one or two isolated traditions, but a veritable mare’s nest of anecdotes, and also of sentences, aphorisms, rhythmic sayings, memorable stories with local variations, and words that were remembered because of their pithy and apposite phrasing, and because of their instantly being repeated by those who had heard them. Again and again he will have said cryptic words about having ears to hear, about the first being last and the last first, about salt and light, and particularly about Israel’s god and his coming kingdom. My guess would be that we have two versions of the great supper parable, two versions of the talents/pounds parable, and two versions of the beatitudes, not because one is adapted from the other, or both from a single common written source, but because these are two out of a dozen or more possible variations that, had one been in Galilee with a tape-recorder, one might have ‘collected’.” [N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, 1996), 170]

Kingdom of God (Jewish Perspective)

“The most important thing to recognize about the first-century Jewish use of kingdom-language is that it was bound up with the hopes and expectations of Israel. ‘Kingdom of god’ was not a vague phrase, or a cipher with a general religious aura. It had nothing much, at least in the first instance, to do with what happened to human beings after they died. The reverent periphrasis ‘kingdom of heaven’, so long misunderstood by some Christians to mean ‘a place, namely heaven, where saved souls go to live after death’, meant nothing of the sort in Jesus’ world: it was simply a Jewish way of talking about Israel’s god becoming king. And, when this god became king, the whole world, the world of space and time, would at last be put to rights....

The phrase ‘kingdom of god’, therefore, carried unambiguously the hope that YHWH would act thus, within history, to vindicate Israel...

...Monotheism and election, the Jews’ twin beliefs, focused themselves into a story which issued in a great hope: there was one god, he was Israel’s god, and he would soon act to reveal himself as such. Israel would at last return from exile; evil (more specifically, paganism, and aberrant forms of Judaism) would finally be defeated; YHWH would at last return to Zion...

Thus, week after week, and year after year, Israel kept alive the memory of what YHWH had done in the past to show that he was king, both of Israel and of the whole world, and so kept alive the hope that his kingdom would soon come, and his will be done, on earth as it was (they believed) in heaven. God’s kingdom, to the Jew-in-the-village in the first half of the first century, meant the coming vindication of Israel, victory over the pagans, the eventual gift of peace, justice and prosperity. [N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, 1996), 202-204]

“His announcement of the kingdom was a warning of imminent catastrophe, a summons to an immediate change of heart and direction of life, an invitation to a new way of being Israel. Jesus announced that the reign of Israel’s god, so long awaited, was now beginning; but, in the announcement and inauguration itself, he drastically but consistently redefined the concept of the reign of god itself. In the light of the Jewish background sketched in *The New Testament and the People of God* Part III, this cannot but have been heard as the announcement that the exile was at last drawing to a close, that Israel was about to be vindicated against her enemies, that her god was returning at last to deal with evil, to right wrongs, to bring justice to those who were thirsting for it like dying people in a desert. We are bound to say, I think, that Jesus could not have used the phrase ‘the reign of god’ if he were not in some sense or other claiming to fulfill, or at least to announce the fulfillment of, those deeply rooted Jewish aspirations. The phrase was not a novum, an invention of his own. It spoke of covenant renewed, of creation restored, of Israel liberated, of YHWH returning.” [N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, 1996), 172]

The Kingdom of God (Christian Perspective)

“The Christian Reappropriation

...The god in question, in the phrase ‘kingdom of god’ and its cognates, is still, without a doubt, the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the one true god of Jewish monotheism, who claims an allegiance that

excludes the worship of idols and the absolute claims of pagan rulers. The people of the kingdom are called to holiness...The god who was thus becoming king had a true people, who would be vindicated when the kingdom finally appeared...They would then be established, as Israel had hoped to be, as the vicegerents of the creator god, ruling over his world. This familiar combination of monotheism and election gave rise, as naturally as did the Jewish expressions of the same beliefs, to eschatology: the creator would act again within history, to bring the kingdom fully to birth...What we find across the board in early Christianity is a firm belief in the presentness of the kingdom, alongside an equally firm belief in its futurity, these two positions being held together within a redefined apocalyptic schema.

Jewish apocalyptic, then, has been rethought, not abandoned, within early Christianity...The early Christian rethinking has taken place because the crucified and risen Jesus has turned out to be the central character in the apocalyptic drama. The point of the present kingdom is that it is the first-fruits of the future kingdom; and the future kingdom involves the abolition, not of space, time, or the cosmos itself, but rather of that which threatens space, time and creation, namely, sin and death...

We have seen that early Christian kingdom-language shared the theological lineaments of the Jewish usage. Yet, even at a surface reading, this early Christian kingdom-language has little or nothing to do with the vindication of ethnic Israel, the overthrow of Roman rule in Palestine, the building of a new Temple on Mount Zion, the establishment of Torah-observance, or the nations flocking to Mount Zion to be judged and/or to be educated in the knowledge of YHWH. A major redefinition has taken place.

The clue to this redefinition lies in the controlling story itself. We are not faced with a new story altogether, but with a new moment in the same story...Specifically, the [Christian movement] sees itself as the time when the covenant purpose of the creator, which always envisaged the redemption of the whole world, moves beyond the narrow confines of a single race, and calls into being a trans-national and trans-cultural community. Further, it sees itself as the time when the creator, the covenant god himself, has returned to dwell with his people, but not in a Temple made with hands...We cannot, in other words, take the easy way out and suggest that the early Christians used kingdom-language in a completely non-Jewish sense. Their reworking...was generated, not by the abandonment of the classic Jewish story, but by the belief that they were living in its long-awaited new phase." [N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, 1996), 214-219]

"Jesus' redefinition of YHWH's kingdom, as we have studied it so far, indicates that in his view the kingdom was indeed present, but that it was not like Israel had thought it would be. Israel's god was becoming king in and through the work of Jesus...Even before the great events that would inaugurate the kingdom on the public stage and in world history, that kingdom was already present where Jesus was...His public ministry was itself the true inauguration of the kingdom which would shortly be established." [N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, 1996), 472]

The Sermon on the Mount

"The Sermon on the Mount

The sermon – to take it for the moment as a whole – is not a mere miscellany of ethical instruction. It cannot be generalized into a set of suggestions, or even commands, on how to be 'good'. Nor can it be turned into a guide-map for how to go to 'heaven' after death. It is rather, as it stands, a challenge to Israel to be Israel.

...Whatever they have meant to subsequent hearers or readers, I suggest that the beatitudes can be read, in some such way, as an appeal to Jesus' hearers to discover their true vocation as the eschatological people of YHWH...

It is easy to generalize the beatitudes, and thus harder to think one's way out of anachronism. But the specific historical context I have suggested cannot be so easily avoided in the case of the words about salt and light (Matthew 5.13-16). They sound a challenge to Israel: she is to be the salt of the earth, the light of the world. That always was her vocation: to be a nation of priests, to be YHWH's servant, so that his glory might reach to the ends of the earth. But the salt has now forgotten its purpose. The light has turned in on itself. The city set on a hill was meant to be the place to which the nations would flock like moths to a lamp, but she has done her best to make herself, and the god to whom her very existence bears witness, as unattractive as possible. There is rebuke within the challenge. Israel, called to be a lighthouse for the world, has surrounded herself with mirrors to keep the light in, heightening her own sense of purity and exclusiveness while insisting that the nations must remain in darkness. But with Jesus' work the way is open, for any Jews who will dare, to find out what being the true Israel is all about. By following him, by putting his agenda into practice, they can at last be true Israel.

...Instead of defining ever more closely the outward action necessary for the keeping of Torah, thereby proving one's loyalty to YHWH's covenant, Israel was challenged to discover the meaning of the commands in terms of totally integrated loyalty of heart and act.

The antitheses [in the sermon (Matthew 5.21-48)] do not, then, focus on the contrast between 'outward' and 'inward' keepings of the law. They are not retrojections into the first century of a nineteenth-century Romantic ideal of religion in which outward things are bad and inward things good. They emphasize, rather, the way in which the renewal which Jesus sought to engender would produce a radically different way of being Israel in real-life Palestinian situations.

...It can, no doubt, be generalized into a universal ethic, as has happened to most of Jesus' teaching. But the question of its original meaning is not thereby resolved...The question of how to apply the sermon to different times and places is another matter, and cannot be allowed to dictate the question of historical origins." [N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, 1996), 292]

Meaning of 'Messiah' and 'Son of God'

"...the word 'Messiah', within Jesus' world, does not refer, in itself, to a divine or quasi-divine figure. There are puzzling and opaque texts in the Hebrew scriptures which speak of the king as one speaks of Israel's god. There are passages where the roles of YHWH and of the king seem to be intertwined. But there is no evidence to suggest that the various messianic and quasi-messianic figures who flit through the pages of first-century history thought of themselves, or were thought of by others, in this fashion.

So, when Peter says to Jesus 'You are the Messiah', and when Caiaphas says the same words but as an ironic question, neither of them should be understood as either stating or asking whether or not Jesus thinks he is the incarnate second person of the Trinity. Subsequent Christian use of the word 'Christ' (the Greek translation of 'Messiah'), and indeed of the phrase 'son of god', as though they were 'divine' titles has, to say the least, not helped people to grasp this point; but grasped it must be if we are to understand Jesus in his historical context." [N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, 1996), 478]

"Several texts from this period speak of the king as 'son of god'. The use of Psalm 2 and 2 Samuel 7 is attested at Qumran in a messianic context, and there are other references which show that 'son of god' as a messianic title was known in various circles in this period. But we must stress that in the first century the regular Jewish meaning of this title had nothing to do with incipient trinitarianism; it referred to the king as Israel's representative. Israel was the son of YHWH: the king who would come to take her destiny on himself would share this title." [N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, 1996), 486]

"Messiahship, and the identification with Israel-in-the-purposes-of-YHWH which it implied, was central to Jesus' self-understanding...

Jesus, then, believed himself to be the focal point of the people of YHWH, the returned-from-exiled-people, the people of the renewed covenant, the people whose sins were now to be forgiven. He embodied what he had announced...

Jesus' redefined notion of Messiahship...pointed on to a fulfillment of Israel's destiny which no one had imagined or suspected. He came, as the representative of the people of YHWH, to bring about the end of exile, the renewal of the covenant, the forgiveness of sins. To accomplish this, an obvious first-century option for a would-be Messiah would run: go to Jerusalem, fight the battle against forces of evil, and get yourself enthroned as the rightful king. Jesus, in fact, adopted precisely this strategy. But, as he hinted to James and John, he had in mind a different battle, a different throne." [N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, 1996), 538-539]

"...Jewish thought in our period used various symbols and ideas to communicate the prevailing belief that, though Israel's god was the transcendent creator, dwelling in heaven and not to be contained within earthly categories, he was nevertheless both continually active within the world and specially active within the history of Israel herself. The symbols in question are well known: Shekinah, Torah, Wisdom, Logos, and Spirit.

Israel's god dwelt (in principal; and he would do so again) in the Temple; his tabernacling presence ('Shekinah') functions as had the pillar of cloud and fire in the wilderness. He revealed himself and his will through Torah...He sent his Wisdom to be the guide of human beings...Language about the Logos became...a way of speaking about the one true god active throughout the cosmos...Finally, the Spirit of YHWH was active both in creation and in inspiring the prophets, and was the supreme equipment of the Messiah himself (Gen. 1.2; Num. 11.17, 23-9; 2 Kgs. 2.9, 15; Neh. 9.20; Isa. 11.2; 42.1; 48.16; 61.1; 63.11).

Turning this around, we find that the Messiah is closely related to most of these symbols, these ways of speaking and thinking about divine activity...This does not reinstate what I denied in chapter 11, the idea that pre- or non-Christian Jews 'believed that the Messiah was "divine" [see quote above from p.478]'. Rather, it emphasizes that the Messiah, if and when he appeared, would be the agent or even the vicegerent of Israel's god, would fight his battles, would restore his people, would rebuild or cleanse the house so that the Shekinah would again dwell in it.

...The language of Shekinah, Torah, Hokmah (Wisdom), Logos, and Spirit were ways of affirming YHWH's intimate involvement with his people and his world, at the same time as affirming also his sovereignty and transcendence over the whole cosmos. They were, in that sense, ways of talking about the personal presence and action, within creation and within Israel's life, of her transcendent creator god. Ultimately, the deliverance that would come for Israel, rescuing her from foreign domination, restoring her rulers as at the beginning, establishing her in peace and justice for ever – this deliverance, even though wrought through human agents, could and would be the work of YHWH himself. The God of the exodus would reveal himself as the God of the renewed covenant. The great act of deliverance would be the supreme moment in, and the supreme vindication of, the story of monotheism itself." [N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, 1996), 629-631]

"I have argued that Jesus' underlying aim was based on his faith-awareness of vocation ('I was sent to...' or 'I came to...' is the language of vocation: cf. e.g. Mt. 9.13/ Mk. 2.17/ Lk. 5.32; Lk. 19.10). He believed himself called, by Israel's god, to evoke the traditions which promised YHWH's return to Zion, and the somewhat more nebulous but still important traditions which spoke of a human figure sharing the divine throne; to enact those traditions in his own journey to Jerusalem, his messianic act in the Temple, and his death at the hands of the pagans; and thereby to embody YHWH's return.

Jesus' beliefs, therefore, remained those of a first-century Jew, committed to the coming kingdom of Israel's god. He did not waver in his loyalty to Jewish doctrine. But his beliefs were those of a first-century Jew who believed that the kingdom was coming in and through his own work...

Speaking of Jesus' 'vocation' brings us to quite a different place from some traditional statements of gospel Christology...As part of his human vocation, grasped in faith, sustained in prayer, tested in confrontation, agonized over in further prayer and doubt, and implemented in action, he believed he had to do and be, for Israel and the world, that which according to scripture only YHWH himself could do and be. He was Israel's Messiah; but there would, in the end, be 'no king but God'.

I suggest, in short, that the return of YHWH to Zion, and the Temple-theology which it brings into focus, are the deepest keys and clues to gospel Christology. Forget the 'titles' of Jesus, at least for a moment; forget the pseudo-orthodox attempts to make Jesus of Nazareth conscious of being the second person of the Trinity; forget the arid reductionism that is the mirror-image of that unthinkable would-be orthodoxy. Focus, instead, on a young Jewish prophet telling a story about YHWH returning to Zion as judge and redeemer, and then embodying it by riding into the city in tears, symbolizing the Temple's destruction and celebrating the final exodus. I propose, as a matter of history, that Jesus of Nazareth was conscious of a vocation: a vocation, given him by the one he knew as 'father', to enact in himself

what, in Israel's scriptures, God had promised to accomplish all by himself. He would be the pillar of cloud and fire for the people of the new exodus. He would embody in himself the returning and redeeming action of the covenant God." [N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, 1996), 651-653]

Next week we will take a look at a few of the better sections from the third book in this series, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.

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February 27, 2012

NT Wright: In His Own Words

As promised in the last blog entry, we would like now to offer a series of posts with quotes from some of NT Wright's best works. Many of these are scholarly books that we don't necessarily recommend to the general public. Nevertheless, they offer many key insights into the historical background of NT times as well as to the original NT message as set forth in the NT. We will begin this series with specific citations from *The New Testament and the People of God*, the first in a projected series of five detailed studies which together form *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, basically a comprehensive theology of the New Testament.

Listen in as NT Wright now discusses in his own words:

History

"...history, I shall argue, is neither 'bare facts' nor 'subjective interpretations', but is rather the meaningful narrative of events and intentions...."

"There is not, nor can there be, any such thing as a bare chronicle of events without a point of view. The great Enlightenment dream of simply recording 'what actually happened' is just that: a dream...

It is therefore chasing after the wind to imagine that anyone, ancient or modern, could or can 'simply record the facts'...There is no such thing as a point of view that is no-one's point of view. To imagine, therefore, as some post-Enlightenment thinkers have, that we in the modern world have discovered 'pure history', so that all we do is record 'how it actually happened', with no interpretative element or observer's point of view entering into the matter—and that this somehow elevates us to a position of great superiority over those poor benighted former folk who could only approximate to such an undertaking because they kept getting in their own light—such a view is an arrogant absurdity.

All history, then, consist of a spiral of knowledge, a long-drawn-out process of interaction between interpreter and source material...there is in fact no such thing as 'mere history' ...all history is interpreted history." [N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, 1992), 82-88]

New Testament Worldviews (General)

"When we are dealing with Jesus and his significance, with Paul and his, with the gospels and theirs, we are in the first instance studying people and movements whose worldviews (and consequent aims, intentions and motivations) included, at a high-profile level, elements that are today known as 'religious'. They believed, that is, in a god who was actively involved in their personal and corporate lives, who had intentions and purposes and was capable of carrying them out through both willing and uncomprehending human agents as well as (what we would call) 'natural forces'. We are therefore studying human history, in the recognition that the actors in the drama, and hence in a sense the drama itself, can only be fully understood when we learn to see the world through their eyes." [N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, 1992), 118]

"...'theology' highlights what we might call the god-dimension of a world view. Many thinkers, politicians and even biblical scholars notoriously dismiss 'theology' as if it were simply a set of answers that might be given to a pre-packaged set of abstract dogmatic questions, but it cannot possibly be reduced to that level. It provides an essential ingredient in the stories that encapsulate world views; in the answers that are given to the fundamental worldview questions; in the symbolic world which gives the worldview cultural expression; and in the practical agenda to which the worldview gives rise. As such it is a non-negotiable part of the study of literature and history, and hence of New Testament studies." [N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, 1992), 130-131]

New Testament Worldviews (Jewish)

"There is then, across the range of Jewish writing that we possess, solid unanimity on certain major and vital issues... There is one god, who made the entire universe, and this god is in covenant with Israel. He has chosen her for a purpose: she is to be the light of the world. Faced with national crisis, this twin belief, monotheism and election, committed any Jew who thought about it for a moment to a further belief: YHWH, as the creator and covenant god, was irrevocably committed to further action of some sort in history, which would bring about the end of Israel's desolation and the vindication of his true people. Monotheism and election lead to eschatology, and eschatology means the renewal of the covenant..."

"These, then, were the beliefs that gave shape not merely to a religious worldview but to the various different movements, political, social and particularly revolutionary, that characterized the period from 167 BC to AD 70. The basis of the eager expectation that fomented discontent and fueled revolution was not merely frustration with the inequalities of the Roman imperial system, but the fact that this frustration was set within the context of Jewish monotheism, election and eschatology. The covenant god would act once more, bringing to birth the 'coming age', ha olam ha-ba, which would replace the 'present age', ha olam ha-zeh, the age of misery, bondage, sorrow and exile." [N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, 1992), 247; 279]

“As good creational monotheists, mainline Jews were not hoping to escape from the present universe into some Platonic realm of eternal bliss enjoyed by disembodied souls after the end of the space-time universe. If they died in the fight for the restoration of Israel, they hoped not to ‘go to heaven’, or at least not permanently, but to be raised to new bodies when the kingdom came...” [N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, 1992), 286]

“Thus the Jews who believed in resurrection did so as one part of a larger belief in the renewal of the whole created order. Resurrection would be, in one and the same moment, the reaffirmation of the covenant and the reaffirmation of creation. Israel would be restored within a restored cosmos: the world would see, at last, who had all along been the true people of the creator god. This is where the twin Jewish ‘basic beliefs’ finally come together. Monotheism and election, taken together, demand eschatology. Creational/covenantal monotheism, taken together with the tension between election and exile, demands resurrection and a new world. That is why some of the prophets used gorgeous mythical language to describe what would happen: lions and lambs lying down together, trees bearing fruit every month, Jerusalem becoming like a new Eden. This, too, was simply the outworking, in poetic symbol, of the basic belief that the creator of the universe was Israel’s god, and vice versa. When he acted, there would be a great celebration. All creation, in principle, would join in.” [N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, 1992), 332]

New Testament Worldviews (Christian)

“Who are we? We are a new group, a new movement, and yet not new, because we claim to be the true people of the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the creator of the world. We are the people for whom the creator god was preparing the way through his dealings with Israel. To that extent, we are like Israel; we are emphatically monotheists, not pagan polytheists, marked out from the pagan world by our adherence to the traditions of Israel, and yet distinguished from the Jewish world in virtue of the crucified Jesus and the divine spirit, and by our fellowship in which the traditional Jewish and pagan boundary-markers are transcended...”

“...Israel’s hope has been realized; the true god has acted decisively to defeat the pagan gods, and to create a new people, through whom he is to rescue the world from evil. This he has done through the true King, Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, in particular through his death and resurrection. The process of implementing this victory, by means of the same god continuing to act through his own spirit in his people, is not yet complete. One day the King will return to judge the world, and to set up a kingdom which is on a different level to the kingdoms of the present world order. When this happens those who have died as Christians will be raised to a new physical life. The present powers will be forced to acknowledge Jesus as Lord, and justice and peace will triumph at last.” [N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, 1992), 370]

“It is basic to early Christianity that the Jewish hope has already been fulfilled. ‘All the god-given promises find their “yes” in Christ’, said Paul... It was precisely because the early Christians believed that Jesus of Nazareth, whom they had regarded as Messiah, had himself been raised from the dead, that

they were able to reverse the linguistic process, taking resurrection as the fixed literal point and treating the return from exile as the great metaphor which explained its significance..."

"...the Christians believed that Israel's god, being the creator, would physically recreate those who were his own, at some time and in some space the other side of death... that there would be a new, bodily, life the other side of the grave, which could not be reduced to terms simply of a generalized Hellenistic-style immortality, was everywhere taken for granted in the early period..."

"New, bodily human beings will require a new world in which to live. In this transformed world order, the veil will be lifted for all time. The realities of the heavenly world will be visibly united with the realities of the earthly."

"The fourth and final aspect of the Christian hope is the expectation of the return of Jesus..."

...since that ultimate future is not a disembodied bliss but a renewal of the whole created order, in which evil will be judged and defeated, that renewal, that judgment, and his return will belong closely with one another." [N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, 1992), 459-462]

Next week we will cite some of the highlights from the second book in the Christian Origins and the Question of God series.

[The vast majority of this post was compiled and written by Scot Hahn, as will be the next several in this series on NT Wright. My thanks to him for all his time and effort in doing this and for all the help behind the scenes that he continually provides for this web-site.]

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NT Wright and The Kingdom New Testament

The world of biblical studies has recently seen the publication of several new translations or fresh editions of already existing versions that have enriched our ability to understand the Bible's message in its original intent and also in more modern English. This is no easy feat and the scholars who worked on these projects should be greatly commended. One new version is NT Wright's own personal translation of the New Testament under the American title of *The Kingdom New Testament*. NT Wright is one of the foremost biblical scholars of modern times and he is easily the most widely known. He has served in many positions over the years both in the Church of England and in academic institutions such as Oxford University. Most recently, he served as the Anglican Bishop of Durham in England for a number of years

and since last year has now returned full time to the academy in his new position as the Chair of NT Studies at St. Andrews University in Scotland. At the age of 63 he has already authored over 50 books, numerous articles, and served in the British Parliament's House of Lords. His books range from NT academic studies for the scholarly community to more popular presentations of NT topics for the primary benefit of the common man.

If I remember correctly, I first became aware of Wright through his articles in the publication *Bible Review* over two decades ago around 1990. I was only mildly impressed at the time since much of what he was speaking about was in regards to Paul's Letter to the Romans and a few of the specific points he made I disagreed with - a disagreement which continues to this day on that specific topic despite a full commentary by him on the subject. I became much more impressed with him in his sterling debates with the ridiculous "Jesus Seminar" which sought to discredit the historicity of the Gospels. Wright devastatingly exposed the fallacies of their untenable historical positions and showed the factual historicity of the Gospels in the light of their original purposes. As I began to read his other writings - especially his major works *The New Testament and the People of God* (1992), *Jesus and the Victory of God* (1996), and *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (2003) - it quickly became apparent that this was a man who knew much that could benefit me and the church at large. From that time I've read almost all of his major works as he has published them and also kept up with his articles, sermons and lectures that were published in various forums and publications.

To this day I believe that Wright is actually a better historian than biblical scholar - though outstanding at both - and that his understanding of major biblical themes is better than his detailed exegesis of individual passages and verses. He is, of course, very British in his perspective on many things thus reflecting the social-democratic and anti-imperialistic norms of the post WWII British society in which he grew up. This, of course, affects his views on certain topics such as politics, economics, and social justice which he can swerve off onto at any moment in his writings. Unfortunately, as with many scholars who grew up in post WWII European style welfare states, he at times [wrongly] reads these ideologies back into the biblical text as though such systems of government, economics, etc. are the logical extension of biblical ethics. However, his ethical positions on personal morality are biblically conservative and consistent - against the grain of modern British society - on modern hot-button moral and ethical issues such sex, marriage and the godly lifestyle that should be the norm of Christian life. As a scholar, when Wright delves into - and sticks to - history itself as well as to the strict exposition of the biblical text in its own historical context, he is amongst the very best and I would endorse all that he writes on these topics as worthy of deep consideration. Certainly Wright is not for everyone - he can be very wordy and way beyond the grasp of the common man at times - but at the same time he is also an extraordinary individual of immense learning and abilities whose articulate and bold advocacy of the truths of biblical Christianity is unparalleled today both in the church at large and in the wider intellectual society.

Fortunately, Wright is highly respected across denominational lines and therefore the benefits of his scholarship have affected Christianity as whole. He knows the orthodox theological borders within which he must navigate, hedge and limit his biblical insights as expressed in his writings in order to gain acceptance within his own Anglican denomination as well as in the wider Christian world. But this is a "skill" which all biblical scholars with jobs or vested interests in institutional Christianity must acquire -

and, it is something that should always be kept in mind by serious readers of their works. Though Wright is somewhat of a lightning rod for many in the more biblically conservative denominations of the Christian world - especially on the somewhat fuzzy details of his position on justification by faith - I would emphasize that overall I believe his writings have been amongst the most valuable contributions to the life of the Christian church over the last quarter of a century. I also believe his grasp of the overall themes and flow of the biblical story has done much to re-orient and re-energize modern Christian scholarship towards a more truly biblical perspective. All of this results in a more accurate biblical scholarship by Christian scholars and leads to many corresponding godly applications to real life for the common man in the midst of this present modern - and all too - evil age in which we live.

One of the many things that NT Wright has going for him is that his Ph.D. advisor was G.B. Caird, a man, if anything, whose biblical perspective and scholarship was even more biblically sound than Wright's. Simply put, Caird's biblical scholarship was ground-breaking and of immense importance in recapturing a biblical understanding that was in accordance with its original historic, cultural and linguistic contexts. Unfortunately, Caird died in his mid-60s leaving unfinished many scholarly projects that he wanted to complete. It is easy to see Caird's influence on Wright, and Wright certainly acknowledges as much; nevertheless, Wright's own scholarly output has far exceeded that of Caird while sometimes expanding on themes developed by Caird and at other times going in new directions that are not in line with Caird's thought. This, of course, is the normal academic process.

Much of Wright's NT understanding can be gleaned from his newly published original translation of the New Testament which in America is entitled, *The Kingdom New Testament*. Perhaps, the best way for most interested people to get a better and deeper understanding of his translation is to also read his very accessible commentary series (*The New Testament for Everyone*, which can be bought as a set or in individual volumes) from which Wright actually developed the first version of his translation. It is a translation that is not meant to replace others but rather to augment, in modern English, one's understanding of the New Testament message. It can be simply read and enjoyed, or it can be used comparatively along with other major versions for deeper study. Below, I quote from some of its passages to give the reader a feel for its vocabulary and flow:

1. "The book of the family tree of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham." Matthew 1:1.

The opening phrase "the book of the family tree" is indicative of the fresh, modern and clear language that Wright uses throughout his translation. It makes for an easy flowing story as one reads through his version. Also, the word *christos* in Greek is sometimes translated by Wright as Messiah, Christ or King, depending on the context. This enables him to emphasize the various nuances of the word. I would personally prefer that he stick to Christ and/or Messiah since I believe that King does not give the full sense of *christos* which really means "God's anointed Savior and King".

2. "This, you see, is how much God loved the world: enough to give his only, special son, so that everyone who believes in him should not be lost but should share in the life of God's new age." John 3:6.

The Greek word *monogenes* which is traditionally translated as "only begotten" is here translated correctly and beautifully as "special." The word means unique or special. In addition, the word "son" is not capitalized reflecting the fact that first century believers would not have understood this word in the sense of later trinitarian theology. The Greek words *zoe aionios* which are traditionally translated as "eternal life" are translated by Wright correctly and importantly in various ways throughout his version such as "the life of God's new age," "the life of the coming age," or "the life of the age to come." The term specifically means "life in, or of, the future age of the kingdom of God." The term "eternal life" is fine as a translation if one understands it in the above sense; however, it can be misleading if it is understood in a non-biblical platonic sense of life in "eternity," a timeless realm beyond earthly existence unto which an immortal soul ascends after escaping from a body at death.

The following is another example, among many, in this translation of what would normally be translated as "eternal life" in other versions:

"The wages paid by sin, you see, are death; but God's free gift is the life of the age to come, in the Messiah, Jesus our Lord." Rom 6:23

3. "The result is this: since we have been declared "in the right" on the basis of faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus the Messiah." Rom 5:1.

Wright often translates the Greek words traditionally translated as "justified", etc. as some version of "declared in the right", etc. This accurately reflects what Paul intends - as does "justified", etc. The words can be used interchangeably. The key is accurate understanding - that is, one is "acquitted" of sin and therefore accepted as "in the right" with God.

4. "When the kindness and generous love of God our savior appeared, he saved us, not by works that we did in righteousness, but in accordance with his own mercy, through the washing of the new birth and the renewal of the holy spirit, which was poured out richly upon us through Jesus, our king and savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and be made his heirs, in accordance with the hope of the life of the age to come." Titus 3:4-7.

There are several things to comment on in these verses. First, note that "holy spirit" is not capitalized, and this is true throughout Wright's New Testament translation. Next, the word following "holy spirit" is translated "which" rather than "who" or "whom". All of this reflects accurately the fact that the "holy spirit" was not seen by the New Testament believers as a separate "person" as in later trinitarian theology, but rather as God's own personal power and presence. Notice also that here Wright uses the word "justified" which he also sometimes translates as above as "declared in the right." He uses these phrases interchangeably according to the context. And finally, notice that the phrase traditionally translated as "eternal life" is also here translated as the "life of the age to come."

I think that the above examples give a fair representation of the fresh renderings offered by Wright which help the reader to understand the New Testament through the eyes of a first century believer rather than as someone living in, say, a post-Nicene world several centuries later or even in today's world. There is no perfect translation and this one certainly is not either. Nevertheless, it gives real

insight into a correct understanding of the New Testament in many places and I would highly recommend it to any student of the Bible.

Next month I will offer some examples of Wright's New Testament understanding from some of his other works.

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