

# *Surprised by Hope* by N.T. Wright

**Book Review**  
**by Barbara Buzzard**



From the front flap of the book: “For years Christians have been asking, ‘If you died tonight, do you know where you would go?’ It turns out that many believers have been giving the wrong answer. It is not heaven.” This statement describing N.T. Wright’s thinking and teaching should be a real challenge to all believers. (I agree with the bishop that the popular answer is wrong, but is not the question also wrong?) Wright is the Church of England Bishop of Durham and one of the world’s foremost biblical scholars and a prolific and well-read author.

Wright begins by painting scenes we are all familiar with in cases of public grief, noting that “They showed a rich confusion of belief, half belief, sentiment, and superstition about the fate of the dead.” He comments on how very far we have come from what used to be taught as Christian teaching on the subject. Wright finds this: “I am convinced that most people, including most practicing Christians, are muddled and misguided on this topic and that this muddle produces quite serious mistakes in our thinking.” He then speaks about the seriousness of mistaken thinking and treats it as “a matter of thinking straight about God and his purposes.”

Wright has found that “*most people simply don’t know what orthodox Christian belief is*” and that they “have little or no idea what the word resurrection actually means or why Christians say they believe it.” This book is an attempt to answer the question about what the ultimate Christian hope is. He gives many and varied examples of popular ignorance on this subject, both within and outside the church, and speaks eloquently of the Christian confusion about hope. Of Canon Henry Scott Holland’s sermons used at funerals (which thousands request), Wright wonders at the “extraordinary denial that is going on when this is done. It amounts to a resolute refusal to tell the truth about the real and savage break, the horrible denial of the goodness of human life, that every death involves... It offers hollow comfort. By itself, without comment, *it simply tells lies*. It is not even a parody of Christian hope. Instead, it simply denies that there is any problem, any need for hope in the first place” (emphasis mine). The importance of this is seen in the contrast of these views: for Scott Holland there is nothing to be conquered, but for John Donne (former Dean of St. Paul’s) death was an enemy. Note well that for the Christian it is a *beaten* enemy. “In line with much classic Christian thought, Donne sees life after death in two stages: first, a short sleep, then an eternal waking. *And death shall be no more*. Donne grasped what we shall discover to be the central New Testament belief: that at the last, death will be not simply redefined but defeated.” Wright explains that if immortal souls leave their immortal bodies, death still rules.

Wright’s insistence on belief in resurrection contrasts starkly with popular teaching: “Current orthodox Christianity no longer holds to the belief in physical resurrection, preferring the concept of the eternal existence of the soul” (*Death and the Afterlife*, Brian Innes). Wright sums up: “Let us be quite clear. If this is true, then death is not conquered but redescribed.” He is adept at pointing out erroneous lines of hymns and how they form our belief systems and he urges us to be clear about the two poles represented: one presents death as a friend coming to take us to a better place, the other as an enemy which can and will be defeated.

“Many Christians grow up assuming that whenever the New Testament speaks of heaven it refers to the place to which the saved will go after death. In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus’ sayings in the other gospels about the ‘kingdom of God’ are rendered as ‘kingdom of heaven,’ so they have their assumptions confirmed and suppose that he is indeed talking about how to go to heaven when you die, which is certainly not what either Jesus or Matthew had in mind. Many mental pictures have grown up around this and are now assumed to be what the Bible teaches or what Christians believe.”

“But the language of heaven in the New Testament doesn’t work that way. God’s kingdom in the preaching of Jesus refers not to postmortem destiny, not to our escape from this world into another one, but to God’s sovereign rule coming ‘on earth as it is in heaven.’ The roots of the misunderstanding go very deep, not least into the residual Platonism that has infected whole swathes of Christian thinking and has misled people into supposing that Christians are meant to devalue this present world and our present bodies and regard them as shabby or shameful.” Could Wright be any stronger? He has said that what is commonly believed among Christians — that we possess immortal souls which go on a journey to heaven or to hell at death — has no warrant in Scripture. I was amazed at Wright’s strength of feeling and his boldness in charging the church with confusion, distortion and wrong rendering of Scripture.

“Resurrection itself has not disappeared entirely, but again and again it is pushed to the margins, and the underlying story told in the service about the recently deceased is not (as it would be were it in line with the New Testament) about their resting peacefully in anticipation of the final renewal of all things but about their going on a journey to end up in ‘God’s kingdom.’ One could put it like this: if someone came to these funeral services with no idea of the classic Jewish and Christian teaching on the subject, the funeral services would do little to enlighten them and plenty to mislead them or confirm them in their existing muddle. I hope that those who take seriously the argument of the present book will examine the current practice of the church, from its official liturgies to all the unofficial bits and pieces that surround them, and try to discover fresh ways of expressing, embodying, and teaching what the New Testament actually teaches rather than the mangled, half-understood, and vaguely held theories and opinions we are meeting...Frankly, what we have at the moment isn’t, as the old liturgies used to say, ‘the sure and certain hope of the resurrection of the dead’ but the vague and fuzzy optimism that somehow things may work out in the end.” Well said, Mr. Wright!

Wright refers to the situation as “contemporary muddle.” Could that be just a tad too kind? The word *muddle* is so British and just so *nice* and recurs frequently (it is part of the story he is telling). But I fear that the word “muddle” covers up rather politely a really sordid state of affairs. After all, Wright has just said that we have a situation where the church is in serious error, teaching error, misleading, confusing, distorting, etc. Now that same church is to be a font of knowledge for its parishioners, a bastion of Truth and a protector of the Holy Scriptures. It seems to be seriously found wanting. He readily paints a picture of massive confusion and speaks of the wider and serious implications of that confusion. His honest admission regarding his church is startling in the extreme: “My own church, the Church of England, part of the worldwide Anglican Communion, declares that it finds its doctrine in scripture, tradition, and reason, taken together in their proper blend. I suggest that a good deal of our current view of death and the life beyond has come from none of these but rather from impulses in the culture that created, at best, *semi-Christian informal traditions that now need to be reexamined in the clear light of scripture. Scripture, in fact, teaches things about the future life that most Christians, and almost all non-Christians, have never heard of*” (emphasis mine). Semi-

Christian? Never heard of? I am bound to say that in any other field of study, these breaches would not be dubbed “muddle” but would come under fire for very serious negligence, mishandling of evidence, appalling scholarship, misrepresentation, etc.

In fact, this leads also to this point: for years the so-called cults have held some of the very beliefs that N.T. Wright now advocates. They have suffered miserably at the hands of church councils and have often been regarded as heretics. How is it then that a member of the orthodox faith can now simply take on some of these beliefs without suffering similar penalties?

To the question “Do we have immortal souls?” Wright answers: “Again, much Christian and sub-Christian tradition has assumed that we all do indeed have souls that need saving and that the *soul*, if saved, will be the part of us that goes to heaven when we die. All this, however, finds minimal support in the New Testament, including the teaching of Jesus, where the word *soul*, though rare, reflects when it does occur underlying Hebrew or Aramaic words referring not to a disembodied entity hidden within the outer shell of the disposable body but rather to what we would call the whole person or personality, seen as being confronted by God. As to immortality, 1 Timothy 6:16 declares that only God himself has immortality, and 2 Timothy 1:10 declares that immortality has only come to light, and hence is presumably only available, through the gospel. In other words, the idea that every human possesses an immortal soul, which is the ‘real’ part of them, finds little support in the Bible.” Remember that this is a British gentleman speaking and therefore when he says “little support” we could translate this into American English as “none whatsoever.”

A central point for Wright is to answer the question of what in Scripture the ultimate hope is — for Christians and indeed for the whole world. What does hope look like? Unfortunately, a startling difference emerges when we compare today’s universal and popular view of hope with what was held by early Christians. To them “Resurrection meant bodies. We cannot emphasize this too strongly, not least because much modern writing continues, most misleadingly, to use the word *resurrection* as a virtual synonym for *life after death* in the popular sense.” He adds, “When the early Christians said that Jesus had risen from the dead, they knew they were saying that something had happened to him that had happened to nobody else and that nobody expected to happen. They were not talking about Jesus’ soul going into heavenly bliss.”

The Bishop emphasizes this point: “Only in the late second century, a good 150 years after the time of Jesus, do we find people using the word resurrection to mean something quite different from what it meant in Judaism and early Christianity, namely, a spiritual experience in the present leading to a disembodied hope in the future.” Wright regards this as a mutation of the faith, and finds the fact that resurrection loses its primacy in importance to be a second mutation, both changing the nature of the faith as it was once held. He regards the loss as so great as to be responsible for the loss of the entire New Testament, i.e. take away one and you have taken away the other.

This is a very interesting point. We are speaking of a change in the meaning of a word being responsible for a loss of the faith. It appears that when we attempt to modify or redescribe or spiritualize or in any other way reduce the impact of an event, we can be guilty of grave error. Wright writes masterly about this: “Death is the last weapon of the tyrant, and the point of the resurrection, despite much misunderstanding, is that death has been defeated. Resurrection is not the redescription of death; it is its overthrow and, with that, the overthrow of those whose power depends on it.” He points out that historically belief in the resurrection empowered many to endure very great suffering. The ones who escaped persecution were the Gnostics who had altered the meaning of the resurrection into a private spirituality, the very opposite of the original

meaning. (And this very idea about one's own private spiritual resurrection is indeed what we hear preached at very many funerals today.) Wright says that "Resurrection in the first century meant someone physically, thoroughly dead becoming physically, thoroughly alive again, not simply surviving or entering a 'purely spiritual' world, whatever that might be. Resurrection therefore necessarily impinges on the public world."

Bishop Wright reveals to us why he was surprised by hope: "*And this is the point where believing in the resurrection of Jesus suddenly ceases to be a matter of inquiring about an odd event in the first century and becomes a matter of rediscovering hope in the twenty-first century.* Hope is what you get when you suddenly realize that a different worldview is possible, a worldview in which the rich, the powerful, and the unscrupulous do not after all have the last word." Pardon my sarcasm when I say that upon investigating the Scriptures, of course one is surprised — because the church does not teach these things! (i.e that the Kingdom of God is our future hope and that the Kingdom of Heaven is a synonym for Kingdom of God and that it will be revealed on the earth.)

One of Wright's most valuable points is, I think, his emphasis on the larger picture — the future world renewed and restored, the Kingdom of God, heaven on earth, and of course Jesus' resurrection which paved the way for our own. With the exception of money, has anything else been more sought for than the fountain of youth, eternity, an undying nature? And yet that very immortality is what is being offered.

Wright's take: "In the last two hundred years Western thought has overemphasized the individual at the expense of the larger picture of God's creation. What is more, in much Western piety, at least since the Middle Ages, the influence of Greek philosophy has been very marked, resulting in a future expectation that bears far more resemblance to Plato's vision of souls entering into disembodied bliss than to the biblical picture of new heavens and new earth...Plato remains the most influential thinker in the history of the Western world. For Plato, the present world of space, time, and matter is a world of illusion, of flickering shadows in a cave, and the most appropriate human task is to get in touch with the true reality, which is beyond space, time and matter...The Platonic strain entered Christian thinking early on, not least with the phenomenon known as Gnosticism." (Gnostics believed that the material world is evil and the aim is therefore to do away with our material selves.)

Here is Wright's enlightening remark: "The discovery of the Nag Hammadi scrolls...has in our day fueled a desire to reinterpret Christianity itself in terms of a supposedly original Gnostic spirituality that contrasts sharply with the *concrete kingdom-of-God-on-Earth* announced by the Jesus of the canonical gospels." The following summary of the state of things certainly got my attention: "Most Western Christians — and most Western non-Christians for that matter — in fact suppose that Christianity was committed to at least a soft version of Plato's position. A good many Christian hymns and poems wander off unthinkingly in the direction of Gnosticism. The 'just passing through' spirituality...encourages precisely a Gnostic attitude: the created world is at best irrelevant, at worst a dark, evil, gloomy place, and we immortal souls, who existed in a different sphere, are looking forward to returning to it as soon as we're allowed to. A massive assumption has been made in Western Christianity that the purpose of being a Christian is simply, or at least mainly, to 'go to heaven when you die,' and texts that don't say that but mention heaven are read as if they did say it, and texts that say the opposite, like Romans 8:18-25 and Rev. 21-22, are simply screened out as if they didn't exist."

I am very grateful for Bishop Wright's warnings regarding Gnosticism and also for his clarity in unearthing the dangers of Platonic philosophy, how it is imbibed without one even being

aware of it and how very opposed it is to Christian teachings. I applaud his insistence on resurrection (and I won't say *bodily* resurrection as that appears to me to be similar to speaking of "frozen ice"), fearlessly exposing what church and culture have done in redefining the word to make it say what they wish, slipping into beloved Gnostic abstraction. It was Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass* who said that a word "means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less." Surely in matters of biblical truth that is not an honest or mature approach!

I applaud Wright's efforts and willingness to "rethink heaven, the resurrection and the mission of the church." I reserve my greatest commendation for Professor Wright's acknowledgement that the Church has been wrong for 1500 years. Now this would be an interesting exercise: are there any groups of believers who actually hold to the same things that Wright has come to? As we would all agree that it is right to honor heroes and stalwarts of the faith, would it not be proper to give honor to those who "got there first"? We would find to the surprise of some that Wright's new views of the soul and of immortality are in fact brilliantly recorded in the massive two-volume work by Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*. Many others could be cited. Now here is a real "muddle," if you will: Some of the "cults" are teaching and have been teaching for many years the very points for which Bishop Wright is arguing. By his own admission, his own church is not teaching these things. What have we here?! Wright time and again inveighs against error by simply stating that the New Testament does not teach that. *But, shockingly, his church does.* Part of Christian responsibility is to find out what is true. *The church should not be making it that difficult.*

Because of the nature of this book, I shall leave the second half for next month, but please "stay tuned" as I promise you — you will be surprised.

Respectfully submitted,  
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