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GUIDES**
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THE DAY THE REVOLUTION BEGAN

Reconsidering the Meaning
of Jesus's Crucifixion

N. T. WRIGHT

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CHAPTER 1: A VITALLY IMPORTANT SCANDAL

WHY THE CROSS?

1. When you hear the phrases “the death of Jesus” or “the cross,” what words or images come to mind? Why is that?
2. According to N. T. Wright, “Like most Christians today, I started my thinking about Jesus’s death with the assumption . . . that the death of Jesus was all about God saving me from my ‘sin,’ so that I could ‘go to heaven’” (p. 4). Does this resonate with you? What were the origins of your thinking on the death of Jesus?
3. Wright offers a few examples of how “the sheer fact of Jesus’s crucifixion and the symbol of the cross itself still carry enormous power in our world” (pp. 5–6). Can you come up with your own examples? What are they?

CHAPTER 2: WRESTLING WITH THE CROSS, THEN AND NOW

1. What is scandalous about the cross? Why have some groups “airbrushed the cross out of the picture, redefined resurrection as a nonbodily transformation, and reduced Jesus to being a teacher of quizzical wisdom” (p. 21)?
2. “Whatever we mean by ‘atonement’ is directly related to whatever we think about God’s ultimate future, particularly about what happens after death. *How* we are saved

is closely linked to the question of what we are saved *for*” (p. 28). Before reading this chapter, had you ever considered the interrelation of the “how” and “for” of salvation? Why or why not?

3. Wright describes how, in the nineteenth century, a Western piety developed that “focused not on God’s kingdom coming on earth as in heaven, but on *my* sin, *my* heavenly (that is, nonworldly) salvation, and of course *my* savior” (p. 35). In your own words, how would you describe how this piety developed? How would you say that your own view of salvation has been impacted by such Western piety?

CHAPTER 3: THE CROSS IN ITS FIRST-CENTURY SETTING

1. Wright devotes this chapter to digging deeper into the two historical contexts of meaning for the crucifixion of Jesus: the Greco-Roman world of late antiquity (pp. 52–63) and the early Jewish world (pp. 63–65). What is one new thing that you learned about each context? How does learning more about them enrich your understanding of the meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus?
2. “We who know about Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib should not find it impossible to imagine something of the mind-set of an execution squad outside Jerusalem” (p. 56). What do you make of Wright’s parallel

here? How might it help you understand the crucifixion of Jesus in a fresh way?

3. “When [Jesus] told his followers to pick up their own crosses and follow him, they would not have heard this as a metaphor” (p. 58). According to Wright, why is this the case? Why do we interpret Jesus’s call metaphorically today?

CHAPTER 4: THE COVENANT OF VOCATION

1. Wright mentions two “mistakes” that reinforce each other and that plague contemporary Western Christianity: that “‘heaven’ (and ‘fellowship with God’ in the present) is the goal, and ‘sin’ (bad behavior, deserving punishment) is the problem” (p. 74). How does this diagnosis strike you? How have these “mistakes” formed your own view of the nature of Christianity?
2. As a corrective to the above “mistakes,” Wright suggests that the “human problem is not so much ‘sin’ seen as the breaking of moral codes . . . but rather idolatry and the distortion of genuine humanness it produces” and the “‘goal’ is not ‘heaven,’ but a renewed human vocation within God’s renewed creation” (p. 74). How does this corrective strike you? If you were to adopt these perspectives, how would your view of the nature of Christianity need to change?

3. Central to Wright's vision of a "covenant of vocation" is "image-bearing," which he describes as "reflecting the Creator's wise stewardship into the world and reflecting the praises of all creation back to its maker" (p. 76). Before reading this chapter, had you ever heard this message in your community of faith? What do you think of it?

CHAPTER 5: "IN ALL THE SCRIPTURES"

1. "In Western culture [sin] has come to be associated, rightly or wrongly, with a killjoy, finger-wagging, holier-than-thou moralism, with a fussy, nit-picking concentration on small personal misdemeanors that ignore major injustice and oppression" (pp. 97–98). Do you associate these things with sin? Does the Bible? If not, where do you think it comes from?
2. Wright argues that the Bible has several words for sin, all of which converge on the idea that "humans were made for a purpose, that Israel was made for a purpose, and that humans and Israel alike have turned aside from that purpose, distorted the vision, and abused their vocation" (p. 99). How does this compare with your current understanding of sin?
3. "The Great Playwright," suggests Wright, "has composed a drama and written a wonderful part especially

for us to play; and, like a spoiled and silly child, we have torn up the script and smirked our way through a self-serving but ultimately self-destructive plot of our own” (p. 101). Does this metaphor help shed new light on sin for you? How so?

CHAPTER 6: THE DIVINE PRESENCE AND THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

1. The title of this chapter is “The Divine Presence and the Forgiveness of Sins.” After reading it, how would you explain the connection Wright wants to draw between God’s presence and having sins forgiven?
2. “Exile was the result of sin. As many biblical writers insisted . . . if exile was to be undone, sin would have to be forgiven” (p. 114). Before reading this chapter, had you ever considered the connection between Israel’s sin and Israel’s exile(s)? How does this connection help you more fully understand the meaning of Jesus and his death?
3. Concerning the forgiveness of sins, Wright claims that contemporary Western Christians “have exchanged the glory of God for a mess of spiritualized, individualistic, and moralistic pottage” and that we have “domesticated the revolution” (p. 115). How so? What does he mean here?

CHAPTER 7: SUFFERING, REDEMPTION, AND LOVE

1. “When we read Isaiah 40–55 as a whole, we find that the motif of redemptive suffering in chapter 53 is new. Up to this point in the poem there is the promise of redemption *from* suffering, on the one hand, and strange vocation of suffering for the ‘servant,’ on the other” (p. 125). What new perspective does Isaiah 53 bring to an understanding of the meaning of Jesus and his death?
2. “When the creator God redeems his covenant people, this will be the result of his *faithful love*” (p. 131). What role does God’s love play in your understanding of the atonement?
3. Wright mentions the figure of the “suffering servant” who appears in Isaiah 40–55, as well as stating that questions about who, exactly, this servant is “has kept scholars up at night for many generations” (p. 139). How do you make sense of the “suffering servant”? Is Wright’s treatment helpful?

CHAPTER 8: NEW GOAL, NEW HUMANITY

1. Wright describes how a “three-layered mistake” within popular modern Christian thought has “*Platonized* our eschatology,” “*moralized* our anthropology,” and “*paganized* our soteriology” (p. 147). In your own words,

- how would you explain what each of these mistakes is and how they impact the Christian life?
2. “The larger [biblical] reality is that *something has happened within the actual world of space, time, and matter, as a result of which everything is different . . .* Heaven and earth were brought together, creating the cosmic ‘new temple’: ‘God was reconciling the world to himself in the Messiah’ (2 Cor. 5:19)” (p. 156). Does seeing the smaller reality—individuals knowing God and receiving forgiveness—through the lens of this larger reality impact your view of the smaller reality? How so?
 3. Do you feel you are becoming able to interpret Jesus’s death “in the same way that the early Christians did” (p. 167)? What are you learning about how to interpret things in this way? What is the value in that?

CHAPTER 9: JESUS’S SPECIAL PASSOVER

1. The death of Jesus “happened at Passover time, and it seems clear that this was deliberate on Jesus’s part” (p. 179). How does this bring fresh meaning to what Jesus accomplished on the cross?
2. Wright notes that “when Jesus wanted to explain to his followers what his forthcoming death was all about, he did not give them a theory, a model, a metaphor, or any other such thing; he gave them a *meal*, a Passover meal”

- (p. 182). Why did Jesus choose a meal to explain his death to his disciples?
3. “At the center of the whole [atonement] picture, we do not find a wrathful God bent on killing someone, demanding blood. Instead, we find the image—I use the word advisedly—of the covenant-keeping God who takes the full force of sin onto himself” (p. 185). Does God’s wrath have a place in your understanding of the atonement? If so, who taught you to think that way?

CHAPTER 10: THE STORY OF THE RESCUE

1. Wright argues that all four gospels “tell the story of Jesus as [a story] of *Israel’s God returning at last*” (p. 200). What is the narrative that you think the gospels tell? Is this the story that comes to mind? Why or why not?
2. Each of the four gospel writers has a unique way of articulating how the “forgiveness of sins” or the “return from exile” comes about (p. 210). Reading through them, did any of these ways stand out to you? What did you learn from reading about all of these ways together?
3. Before reading this chapter, how would you have characterized “The Story of the Rescue”? After reading this chapter, how would you characterize it? What changed, if anything?

CHAPTER 11: PAUL AND THE CROSS

APART FROM ROMANS

1. Wright suggests that, for Paul, “Humans were to be saved not for ‘heaven’ . . . but for the new creation” (p. 228) and that “would be attained *by means of* the death of Jesus”(p. 229). Where do you see this goal of “new creation” in Paul’s letters?
2. “United worship here and now, rather than disunited church life in the present and a distant ‘heaven’ after death, was always, as far as Paul was concerned, the divinely intended goal of the Messiah’s death” (p. 233). When you think about the theme of Paul’s letters, is this what comes to mind? Why or why not?
3. What is one thing that you learned about the meaning of the death of Jesus from Wright’s engagement with Paul’s letters to the Galatians, Corinthians, Philippians, and Colossians (pp. 234–261)?

CHAPTER 12: THE DEATH OF JESUS IN PAUL’S LETTER TO THE ROMANS *THE NEW EXODUS*

1. “At times [Romans] sweeps you along on a tide of extraordinary writing and glorious hope, while at other times it plunges you not only into gloom, but into serious puzzles, knotty intellectual problems, and arguments that make you wonder whether St. Paul is losing

his balance or whether, perhaps, you are the one losing your balance” (p. 264). Do you relate to this description of the experience of reading Romans?

2. Wright notes that Romans is composed of four sections (chapters 1–4, 5–8, 9–11, and 12–16). “That means—among many other things—that we should beware of isolating any single section and treating it by itself as a statement of the ‘gospel’” (p. 266). Have you known people who take and use portions of Romans out of context? How might this suggestion help your reading and understanding of Romans in the future?
3. In Romans 5–8, Paul compares the Exodus with humanity’s rescue from sin. Does working with the image of Exodus enrich your understanding of Romans 5–8? How so?

CHAPTER 13: THE DEATH OF JESUS IN PAUL’S LETTER TO THE ROMANS *PASSOVER AND ATONEMENT*

1. According to Wright, the “usual way” of reading Romans 1–4 is problematic. In your own words, how would you summarize his critique (pp. 299–317)? Do you agree with him?
2. In many “gospel” presentations today, the story goes like this: “we sinned, God sent Jesus to die for us, we

- are saved. No mention of Israel” (p. 311). What happens when Israel is left out of how we articulate the gospel? What role should Israel play in these articulations?
3. Wright describes Paul’s message in Romans 3:24–26 this way: “We all committed idolatry, and sinned; God promised Abraham to save the world through Israel; Israel was faithless to that commission; but God has put forth the faithful Messiah, his own self-revelation, whose death has been our Exodus from slavery” (p. 347). Is this how you were taught to interpret this passage? Why or why not? How does it inform your understanding of the gospel message?

CHAPTER 14: PASSOVER PEOPLE

1. The resurrection of Jesus “was not simply a surprise happy ending to the story. It was, and was bound to be seen as, a glorious *beginning*” (p. 355). Have you viewed the resurrection as an ending or a beginning? Has that changed at all? Explain.
2. “*Christian mission means implementing the victory that Jesus won on the cross. Everything else follows from this*” (p. 358). How would you define mission? How does Wright’s definition compare with your own?
3. Building upon the above definition of mission, Wright clarifies that “*the victory of the cross will be imple-*

mented through the means of the cross” (p. 366). What does he mean? How might the cross shape how mission works?

CHAPTER 15: THE POWERS AND THE POWER OF LOVE

1. “This is at the heart of the ongoing revolution: that *a new way of being human* has been launched, a way that starts with forgiveness (God’s forgiveness of those who turn from their now defeated idols) and continues with forgiveness (the forgiveness offered by Jesus’s followers in his name and by his Spirit to all who have wronged them)” (p. 385). Before reading this chapter, had you ever considered that the resurrection provides a new way to be human? What might this look like?
2. “The familiar trio of money, sex, and power are enthroned as securely as ever” (p. 393). Where do you see these three powers at work today? How might the cross shape how we engage them?
3. “Embrace the ‘covenant of vocation’ or, rather, be embraced by it as the Creator calls you to a genuine humanness at last, calls and equips you to bear and reflect his image” (p. 416). What would it look like for you to embrace the “covenant of vocation” more fully in your own life? What would have to change? What could stay the same?

FINAL QUESTIONS

1. What is one major shift in your thinking that has occurred over the course of reading this book? Or, does the shift need to come in how you live out your mission as a “new way of being human”?
2. After reading this book, how would you explain the gospel to a non-Christian?