

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Surprised by Scripture

by

N. T. Wright

In this collection of timely essays, bishop, Bible scholar, and bestselling author N. T. Wright deftly probes the cultural and religious mores of our day, exploring topics such as the ordination of women, the role Christians play in caring for the environment, the science-versus-scripture debates, and more, showing us a vibrant and restorative way to move forward.

CHAPTER 1:

HEALING THE DIVIDE BETWEEN SCIENCE AND RELIGION

1. Wright argues in this chapter that the divide between science and religion stems from the Epicurean belief that God is uninvolved in the world. Have you encountered an Epicurean mind-set among your coworkers, friends, or even other Christians (p. 7)? How does that

philosophy affect how one lives one's life and makes important decisions (p. 10)?

2. Epicureanism “is the default mode, sadly, for most Christians who oppose modern science as well as for scientists who oppose modern Christianity. That is the problem behind all the specific hand-to-hand fighting over particular issues” (p. 11). Do you agree with Wright? When bad things happen, people don't know how to make sense of a God who would allow those bad things to happen, so they attach themselves to Epicureanism, or the belief that God is uninvolved in the world, to make sense of it.
3. Wright believes that many Christians “inherit and operate within the deeply damaged vision . . . that some things happen naturally, while other things happen only because God makes them happen” (p. 14). Do you think this worldview needs to be challenged, and if so, how?
4. Do you believe that science and faith can work together, or will there always be a divide? In what ways can Christians operate in the space of “both/and” rather than the “either/or” of separating science and faith?

CHAPTER 2: DO WE NEED A HISTORICAL ADAM?

1. Do you believe in a historical Adam? Is it essential to your faith? Do you fear that if you don't believe in a

historical Adam, you are letting go of the authority of scripture (p. 27)? Why or why not?

2. In this chapter Wright teaches that the Bible isn't just about how to get saved but also about how God is reclaiming his lordship over all creation, a project that began in Genesis but was aborted with the fall of Adam (p. 28). Is this news to you? How does Wright confront your belief system and shake up your concept of how God will redeem the world?
3. A great problem is identified in this chapter: "We have seen the goal of it all as humans being rescued so that we could have fellowship with God, but the Bible sees the goal as humans being rescued so that we could sum up the praises of all creation and look after that creation as God's wise stewards" (p. 36). How does this goal connect us to the calling of Adam? Does this goal conflict with your view of a historical Adam?
4. How have you accepted the call to be an "image-bearing human being renewed in Jesus" (p. 39)? Does relating to God through sharing his image as a human affect how you view others? What are ways one can "make things right" in the world by reflecting God's image?

CHAPTER 3:

CAN A SCIENTIST BELIEVE IN THE RESURRECTION?

1. In answering the question "Can a scientist believe in the resurrection?" Wright explores different ways of

- knowing—scientific and historical knowing, and knowing through faith, hope, and love (p. 42). How have these different forms of knowing informed your understanding of the resurrection? Do you lean toward one mode over another?
2. Which ways of knowing truth require you to expand your paradigm for understanding the resurrection (p. 61)? Does this differ from understanding the historical accuracy of other passages of scripture?
 3. Do you agree with Wright that love is the “deepest mode of knowing” (p. 63) and that it ultimately takes *agape* love to believe the resurrection? Why can’t one use solely an objective historical argument as the ground for defending the truth of Easter?

CHAPTER 4: THE BIBLICAL CASE FOR ORDAINING WOMEN

1. It’s common to hear the verse from Galatians 3:28 mistranslated as “Neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female” (p. 66). Wright points out that it should be translated as “no male and female.” How does this change in translation affect your understanding of the new creation Paul describes?
2. A first-century reader of the story of Mary sitting at Jesus’s feet would understand that in that posture she would be absorbing Jesus’s wisdom to become a teacher or rabbi herself (p. 70). How does this picture of Mary with Jesus change or inform your view of the ordina-

tion of women? What do you think Jesus would say to the modern church about female ordination?

3. Wright states that “God’s creation needs humans to be fully, gloriously, and truly human, which means fully and truly male and female” (p. 76). How has our society’s desire to define and assign gender diminished the glory of God’s created order? How might this change the way one sees and worships God in creation? How is this view shaped by men and women serving together in a fully human capacity?
4. After reading this chapter, do you believe that men and women should both be given the opportunity to develop gifts of learning, teaching, and leadership (p. 81)? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 5: JESUS IS COMING—PLANT A TREE!

1. What was your view of heaven prior to reading this chapter? How did you come to believe this view?
2. Wright presents two views of heaven on pages 84–85, indicating that there is a spectrum between them. One belief is that we will escape the present world, while the other is that God will continue to work on the world until it becomes a perfect world. Where do you fall on this spectrum?
3. This chapter calls attention to a misinterpretation of scripture in the way we understand our promised

inheritance (pp. 92–93). If this inheritance is not a distant heaven but a renewed, restored creation, how does that change how you live and care for God’s creation today? Do you believe you are called to “bring forth real and effective signs of God’s renewed creation” (p. 106)?

CHAPTER 6: 9/11, TSUNAMIS, AND THE NEW PROBLEM OF EVIL

1. Three characteristics make up the new problem of evil: we ignore evil unless it hits us in the face, we are surprised by evil, and we react to evil in immature and dangerous ways (pp. 112–113). Do you agree with Wright’s assessment? If so, how have you seen these characteristics displayed in your life, your community, and the world?
2. “The story of Gethsemane and the cross present themselves in the New Testament as the strange, dark conclusion to the story of what God does about evil, of what happens to God’s justice when it takes human flesh, when it gets its feet muddy in the garden and its hands bloody on the cross” (p. 119). How is the cross a sign to you of how to address wickedness and evil in the world?
3. God may not save you *from* the dark forces, but how has God saved you *in* the darkness (p. 127)? If you can, point to an example in your life where this has occurred.

CHAPTER 7: HOW THE BIBLE READS THE MODERN WORLD

1. Wright suggests that we live in a split-level world where a “detached spirituality in the present is then matched by an otherworldly hope for the future, a heaven that will have left behind forever the world of space, time, and matter” (p. 134). Do you agree? Have you experienced how this “Epicurean split” has caused confusion in the church?
2. The Bible confronts this split-level mentality and invites us “into a world that does indeed have two levels, loosely called ‘heaven’ and ‘earth,’ but in which those two levels are not split apart as in Epicureanism but fused together in complex and intricate ways” (pp. 142–143). How has this chapter encouraged you to be an involved participant in God’s story about his world, a fusion of heaven and earth, and a reflection of the invisible God?

CHAPTER 8: IDOLATRY 2.0

1. While idol worship may seem a thing of the past, three of the ancient gods, Aphrodite, Mammon, and Mars, are still worshipped today, in the form of love, money, and power. Wright observes in this chapter that for many people God has been banished upstairs while other gods have taken God’s place (p. 154). When have you shown allegiance to one of these gods or idols? For

those who believe that God belongs upstairs—which means people can live the way they want—is it possible to avoid the lure of these smaller, ancient gods?

2. “We have run the risk for too long of taking apart our entire world to see how it works, in order that we may make it work to our short-term advantage” (p. 160). Wright believes it’s time for a fresh integration by placing wisdom incarnate, Jesus, at the center. How might one begin this process of reintegration? What would it look like in your relationships or work?

CHAPTER 9: OUR POLITICS ARE TOO SMALL

1. Prior to reading this chapter, did you believe that God belongs in public life? Why?
2. Wright points out that the New Testament reaffirms the God-given place of flawed and corrupt secular rulers. “We in the contemporary Western world have all but lost the ability . . . to affirm simultaneously that rulers are corrupt and must be confronted and that they are God-given and must be obeyed” (p. 176). Do you agree? Do you believe God can use rulers who don’t know God personally to bring order and rescue the world? If so, who are some examples?
3. In what ways does the current church need to be continually called to account as well as do its part in “holding the powers to account and thus advancing God’s restorative justice” (p. 179)?

CHAPTER 10: HOW TO ENGAGE TOMORROW'S WORLD

1. In Colossians 1:15–16, Paul reminds us that our confidence is not in Western culture or democracy but in Jesus and him alone (p. 185). What does the truth in this passage spark in you? How does it call you to think afresh about what it means to live in this modern age of Western democracy?
2. Wright says that even though we “have retained our distinctive Christian witness in some areas, we have undoubtedly compromised it in others” (p. 186). When have you held tightly to the teachings of Jesus, and when have you been content to drift with different political teachings? What has been your method for deciding when to hold firm and when to let go?
3. “Here is the heart of our confidence, whatever the world around may throw at us: the crucified and risen Jesus is *already* lord of the world” (p. 189). How does this quote inspire you to renew your call to follow Jesus in prayer, holiness, and confidence in his power?

CHAPTER 11: APOCALYPSE AND THE BEAUTY OF GOD

1. What role do you think art should play in the Christian worldview?
2. Wright proposes a challenge for the Christian artist: “To tell the story of the new world so that people can

taste it and want it, even while acknowledging the reality of the desert in which we presently live” (p. 203).

What art have you seen that depicts these images? If you consider yourself an artist, how does your art fall within this challenge?

3. Within God’s vision of the new heavens and new earth, “each of us has a particular calling—prophetic, artistic, political, theological, scientific, whatever it may be—by which God will call us to bring signs of that new world to birth within the old one” (p. 206). What do you believe your calling is in bringing the new world into the old? Has God made this calling clear to you? How might you discern God’s calling in order to engage in activities that foreshadow the coming of the new heaven and new earth?

CHAPTER 12: BECOMING PEOPLE OF HOPE

1. “Without the message of faith and love that Easter provides we are nothing, but with that message the world opens up before us as a strange, unmapped new land, full of possibilities and challenges” (p. 211). When and how did the Easter message, the expression of God’s inexhaustible love, find you and change you? How does this message challenge you to be “Jesus people for the world, kingdom people for the world, forgiveness people for the world” (pp. 211–212)?

2. Like Thomas, was it difficult for you to believe (pp. 212–213)? Were you let down by the church, or did the church leave you feeling cramped and constrained? If this wasn't your experience, do you know people who are in this place? How can you meet these people half-way, like Jesus with Thomas, and show them the signs of God's powerful love and generosity?
3. In what ways do acts of love enable you to believe in the resurrection? How do you experience hope?
4. As you reflect on each topic presented in this book, which message or insight stands out to you and why? How did this book change your perception of how scripture still engages contemporary issues of our day?