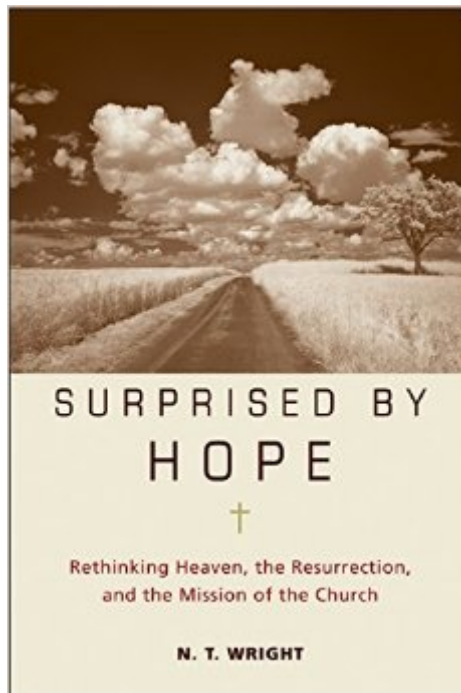


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Surprised By Hope: Rethinking Heaven, The Resurrection, And The Mission Of The Church



Synopsis

In *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, top-selling author and Anglican bishop, N.T. Wright tackles the biblical question of what happens after we die and shows how most Christians get it wrong. We do not go to heaven; we are resurrected and heaven comes down to earth--a difference that makes all of the difference to how we live on earth. Following N.T. Wright's resonant exploration of a life of faith in *Simply Christian*, the award-winning author whom *Newsweek* calls "the world's leading New Testament scholar" takes on one of life's most controversial topics, a matter of life, death, spirituality, and survival for everyone living in the world today.

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Customer Reviews

N.T. Wright has written another brilliant work echoing his previously published masterpiece on the resurrection. Wright's expounds on a Christian hope firmly rooted in the Biblical narrative that longs for new creation. In a world where the radio orthodoxy of Christianity espouses a gospel of fire insurance, Wright correctly and articulates a gospel and hope for so much more than disembodied bliss. "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". Our hope according to Wright is not "going to heaven when you die" but rather in life after life after death. We hope not for an escape from this earth, but to the glorious day when God will make all things new. Readers of this book may find the lack of eschatological certainty within the book frustrating. In a Christian sub-culture where end-times charts and elaborate explanations of the book

of Revelation are the norm, Wright is careful to show that Christian eschatology is not about a certitude of specific events yet to come, but rather a hope for a renewed earth. Eschatology must be viewed as sign posts guiding our way through a fog rather than a detailed map. Wright's comments in chapter 12 on the meaning of salvation are worth the price of the book, and his restatement of the doctrine of hell in chapter 11 is worth twice the price of the book. How we view the gospel, and the death and resurrection of Jesus greatly determines how our definition and the outworking of salvation. In short, this is N.T. Wright at his best. A foremost expert on the resurrection of Jesus and the implications of Christ's defeat of death on eschatology and future hope, Wright has given us a clear, readable, and deeply Biblical picture of Christian hope.

Wright states in the preface, "Most people, in my experience-including many Christians-don't know what the ultimate Christian hope really is. Most people-again, sadly, including many Christians-don't expect Christians to have much to say about hope within the present world" (xi). Wright's aim in this book is to do his part to straighten this out. Chapter 1 sets the scene by describing the broader world's confusion about hope, then describes three popular views about the afterlife in the world: annihilation, reincarnation, and ghosts and the possibility of spiritualistic contact with the dead (new age stuff). Chapter 2 describes the reigning confusion about hope in the church, which has oscillated between seeing death as a vile enemy or a welcome friend. Wright blames Platonism's influence on the Christian faith for much of the confusion and reason why so many value the soul over the body. He is concerned that not many Christians understand biblical hope, and rarely think about it, much less live in light of it. The biblical vision of "heaven" is not souls flying off to a spiritual domain but resurrected bodies reigning with Christ on the new heavens and new earth. He then lays out the effects of the confusion in our hymns (the ultimate vision is not us going home up there but Christ coming here), our celebration of the Christian year (Easter should be celebrated more than Christmas), and funerals. The wider implications of our confusion about the future have to do with how we live here and now, and the way we look at earth and our actions here. If one thinks God is going to destroy this universe, why care about it now? Wright rightly argues that there will be both continuity and discontinuity between this earth and the transformed earth, so that what we do here matters enormously. Chapter 3 was very helpful, laying out the Jewish and pagan historical setting and their beliefs about resurrection around the time of Jesus. This whet my appetite for his big book on resurrection. The early Christians modified the Jewish belief in at least 7 ways. Jews were looking for one big end-time resurrection event, not one man in the middle of history before all others. Here we have NT inaugurated eschatology. Christ's resurrection was the first fruits (the first

of the harvest guaranteeing the rest) securing the resurrection of all who are incorporated into him by faith (although Wright might say baptism). Chapter 4 covers the Easter accounts in the gospels. Here Wright makes the case for the resurrection historically and apologetically. Ultimately, there is a clash of worldviews but all the evidence points to the fact that Christ has been raised. How will you respond? Chapter 5 covers God's future world and describes two worldly alternatives to hope: evolutionary optimism (the myth of progress that cannot deal with the rampant evil in the world) and souls in transit (with a negative view of all things material - Platonic & Gnostic - the "just passin' through" mindset). The next chapter lays out the Christian view of the future world, which is opposed to both. The fundamental structures of hope are the goodness of creation, the nature of evil, and the plan of redemption. God has raised Christ and has promised to not only raise us, but redeem the whole cosmos (Rom 8.18-25). In chapter 7, Wright lays out the biblical teaching on the ascension, cosmology, and concludes with a brief comment on the second coming and the unfortunate effects of the "highly distorted" interpretations of dispensationalism (119). In chapter 8, he tackles the second coming, focusing on the son of man sayings, parousia (coming), and attention to 1 Thess 4.16-17, 1 Cor 15, & Phil. 3. Wright sees the son of man coming sayings as being fulfilled in A.D. 70 with the destruction of Jerusalem. The next chapter focuses on the coming of Jesus as judge. God in Christ will set the world to rights. Chapter 10 is on the future resurrection in Scripture. In order to distinguish his view from the popular view, he calls the resurrection "life after life after death" (148). Here he rightly focuses on 1 Cor 15. Our future bodies will be physical, and entirely animated by the Spirit. He closes the chapter by answering the practical questions of who, where, what, why, when, and how of the resurrection. Chapter 11 answers the question of "Where are the dead now?" Wright knocks down the belief in purgatory, and also explains paradise, or the intermediate state. If we die before the Lord returns, we go to paradise, to be with the Lord until he returns to the earth to raise our bodies and renew the cosmos. Wright then argues against universalism, against annihilationism, and for a novel view of hell, where basically the person who was once human, become "ex-human." Chapter 12 deals with the practical implications of hope. He writes of the significance of our work here and now. He also says we should rethink what we mean by salvation by making it broader: "Salvation, then, is not 'going to heaven' but 'being raised to life in God's new heaven and new earth" (198). He closes the chapter with a theological and practical exposition of the kingdom of God. Chapter 13 is about building for the kingdom. As mentioned, there will be continuity but we aren't told what this will look like. He seeks a middle way between the social gospel advocates and fundamentalists. He mentions the work of justice, beauty, and evangelism. The following chapter goes to the biblical roots for reshaping the church's mission looking primarily at the Gospels, Acts,

and Paul. His exposition of Luke 24 is great. Wright concludes with a chapter on living for the future with the redeeming of space, time, and matter. "The mission of the church is nothing more or less than the outworking, in the power of the Spirit, of Jesus's bodily resurrection and thus the anticipation of the time when God will fill the earth with his glory, transform the old heavens and earth into the new, and raise his children from the dead to populate and rule over the redeemed world he has made" (265). He ends the book with 6 aspects of resurrection and spirituality (new birth and baptism, Eucharist, prayer, Scripture, holiness, love) and an appendix consisting of 2 Easter sermons. 80% of this book is excellent. Wright has immersed himself in the story of Israel and the sources of the 1st century. His writing style is excellent. The truth and glory of the resurrection needs to be emphasized more and more in our churches. Our people need to be a people characterized by hope, which motivates mission. God's people also ought to be holistic. Wright is right that the Christian mission consists of more than 'saving souls.' It is at this point however that I take issue with the book. The section on hell is far from the biblical text. It seems strange to me that with his knowledge of the text he can say that "Jesus simply didn't say very much about the future life" (177). Christ spoke more of hell than anyone else in the NT. Wright lacks categories for sin, and wrath. Dehumanization does not do justice to Scripture's teaching on final judgment. I agree that some verses speak metaphorically, but one cannot escape the conclusion that hell will consist of physical and psychological torment, an element that Wright's doctrine of hell certainly misses. He caricatures the traditional view, and waxes eloquent on his own view. This may also feed his de-emphasis on evangelism and 'saving souls.' But if all sinners will face is sub-humanity, the urgency of sharing the gospel decreases significantly. He seems more excited about political engagement than pointing sinners to Christ, who saves from the coming wrath (1 Thess 1.10). Wright is certainly on a program to move away from the individualism of modernity, but we ought not go further than the text. God is concerned with individuals as well as corporate structures. The new perspective comes out in places as well. In the chapter on judgment, he writes that God's verdict will be on the basis of the "entire life led" which is another way of saying by obedience or works. I want to agree with Wright that obedience is absolutely necessary for salvation, but the basis of our salvation is Christ crucified and risen. Our obedience flows from a salvation given to faith in Christ. Finally, if one did not know better, you'd think that he was the first one who is actually teaching the biblical view of heaven as a new earth. Certainly, many Christians are confused on this issue but there have been many theologians before Wright teaching resurrection and a new earth (not least the Dutch Reformed tradition: Berkouwer, Bavinck, Hoekema, Berkhof, & Randy Alcorn and David Lawrence).

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