

HEAVEN + EARTH

*N.T. Wright Sets
Things Straight About
the Kingdom of God*

The texts that comprise the Bible are living texts—each one birthed in a very real and particular flesh-blood-and-spirit context. Helping people understand Scripture within its ancient context is the subject of N.T. Wright's latest book, *The New Testament in Its World*, with Michael F. Bird (Zondervan, 2019).

Wright serves as research professor of New Testament and early Christianity at St. Mary's College at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. Even with more than 70 books on his writer's shelf, Wright has lost none of his passion for helping people understand the Bible better. He spoke recently with *Bible Study Magazine*.

BSM: Let's start with your new book. What is the most important thing you learned in writing it?

WRIGHT: The book is the distillation of things I've been writing for nearly 30 years now. I started writing *The New Testament and the People of God* in 1989 when I was in Jerusalem, and I've been writing that series on and off ever since. And what Michael Bird and I have done is put it all together into a single volume. So the single thing that I've learned is precisely that the more you understand the first-century history, the more the whole New Testament springs to life and comes up in three dimensions, and makes all kinds of sense which one wouldn't have guessed at from the ordinary Western Christian traditions that most of us grew up in. ...

One of the things I always try to do with students is to get them feeling at home in the first century. Teaching biblical studies is basically a branch of history, a very specialized branch of history. And one of the mantras of the great historians is that when you're studying history, you are learning to think into the minds of people who think differently from yourself. They have different narratives in their minds. They have different cultural symbols that they order their lives around. They have different life goals from what we have.

Trying to get inside that and feel like a first-century Jew would feel—that, for me, is always the thing to do. And when we do that, probably the biggest single mistake that people bring with them from most churches—whether Catholic or Protestant, whether liberal or conservative—is this old, basically medieval idea that the aim of being a Christian is “to go to heaven when you die” and to be sure that you know that that's happening.

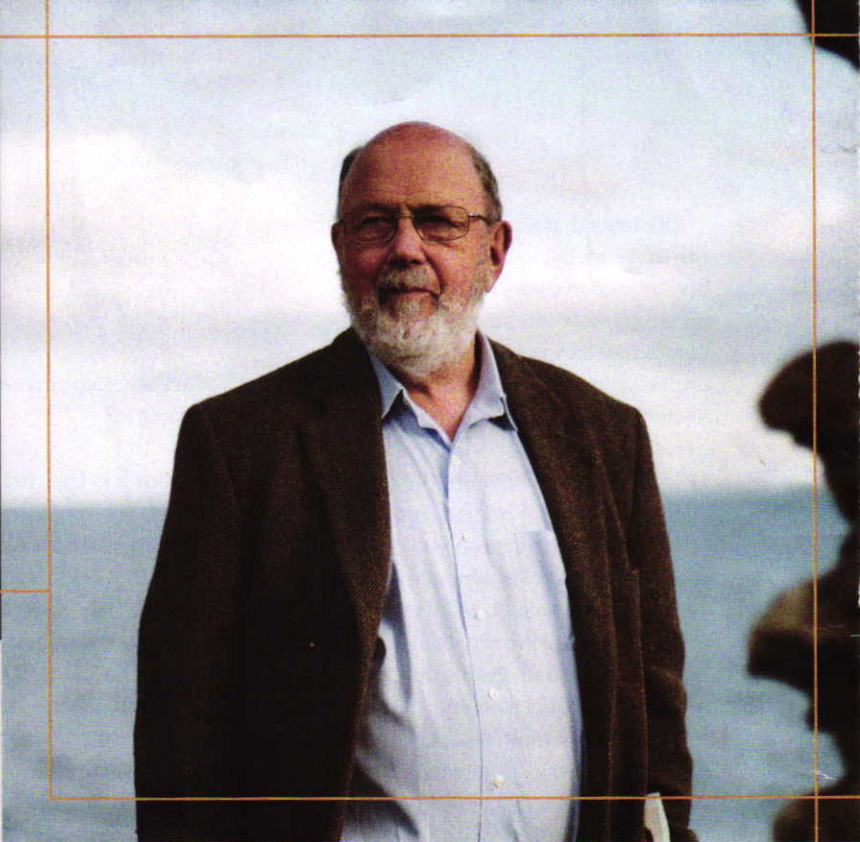
In the Bible, the main aim is, as Paul says in Ephesians, that God wants to sum up in the Messiah, Jesus, all things in heaven and on earth. It's the coming together of heaven and earth rather than the leaving of earth behind and going to heaven.

That (leaving earth and going to heaven) is basically the **Platonic** worldview. You find it in **Plutarch** at the end of the first century, where he says, “Our souls are in exile from heaven, and we are looking forward to them going back there when they're allowed to.” And when I first read that, I thought, “Heavens! That's what an awful lot of my Christian friends think is Christianity.” But you don't find that in Paul, you don't find it in the Gospels, you find it in Middle Platonism. And I think that's the biggest problem—that Western Christianity has been very Platonic in particular in recent days because it's been reacting against

Plato was a Greek philosopher who lived around 427–347 BC. He was a student of Socrates and the teacher of Aristotle. Plato regarded the soul as a divine spark that is never really at home in the body and is released from the body at death. His views led to a school of thought called Platonism.

Plutarch lived during the first century AD, around the time of Jesus and Paul. A Greek historian and philosopher, Plutarch developed the ideas of Plato and Aristotle.

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what we have called secularism. That is to say that the gods are a long way away; they're not interested in us, so we've got to do our own thing. And so the secularists trumpet that, and the Christians think, "No, no. That must be wrong. So what are we going to do?" And we run back to old Uncle Plato, and he will help us out of this mess.

Once we understand first-century Jewish history and culture and context and then read the New Testament as the new thing, it's the new thing *within that context*. Yes, of course, early Christianity is an extraordinary bomb on the playground of all worldviews at the time, but the worldview that it actually impacted in and from was the worldview of the first-century Jew. So that's the crucial thing—to get people understanding that history, and then taking it forward from there. ...

It's a constant battle to think into the first century and to be at home there. And that, obviously, is what the new book is about. But the aim throughout is to get people to be mentally and emotionally living in the first century, so that when they hear a saying of Jesus, they are instantly and automatically thinking, "How is that being heard in AD 30, and what would Jesus have intended by it when he actually said it?"—which is totally different, quite often, from what you get if you don't do that particular bit of historical work.

BSM: So what's the correct picture we should be seeing from the Bible? If our typical

understanding is off the mark, how does Scripture portray things?

WRIGHT: Well, the thing which I've been more and more coming around to over the last 20 or 30 years, as my regular readers will know, is to turn the normal Western narrative inside out or upside down. ... The normal Western narrative is about saved souls going to heaven when they die. That is not the biblical narrative. The Bible ends with the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth so that the dwelling of God is with humans.

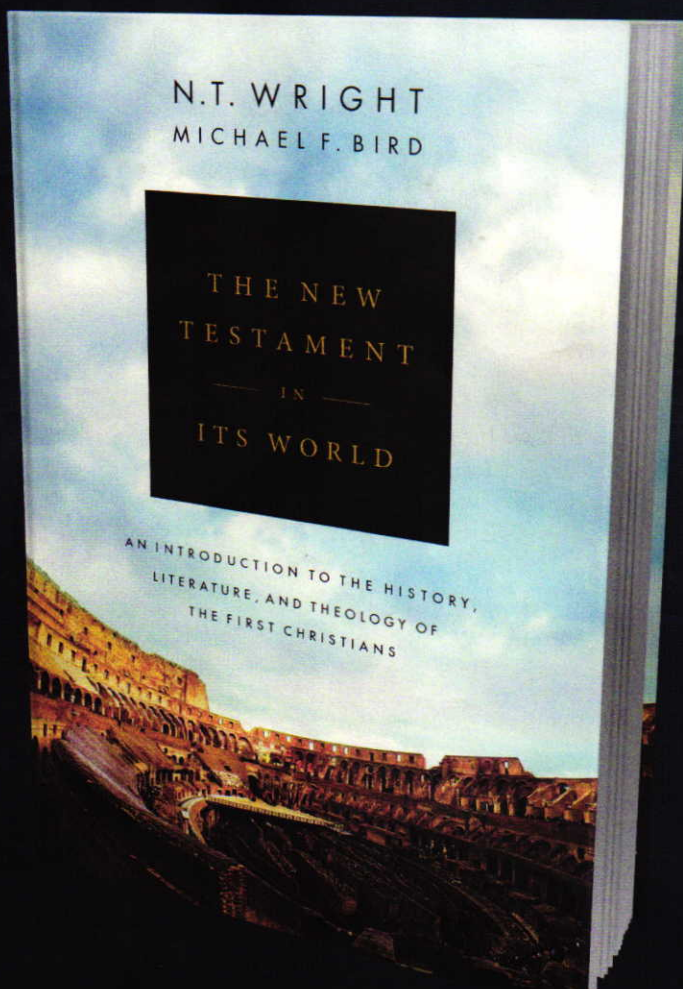
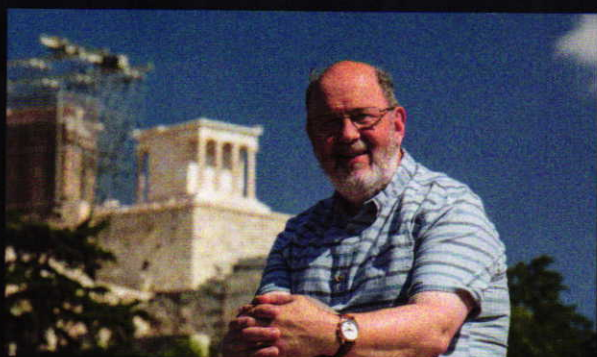
This foregrounds the creation of the tabernacle in the second half of the book of Exodus, climaxing in Exodus 40 when God comes to live in it, and with the temple, when Solomon builds the temple and the divine glory comes to dwell there.

Then in the New Testament, this is the key to understanding who Jesus is. John makes it clear: the Word became flesh and *tabernacled*—pitched his tent in our midst (John 1:14). And the Greek is *eskēnōsen*, which means, "put up his tent," and that goes all the way back to the tabernacle.

So the whole biblical narrative is about God coming to dwell with us. And the question of sin and salvation is, "How can God come and dwell with us, granted who we are?"

N. T. Wright's Lifetime of Scholarship— In One Book

THE NEW TESTAMENT IN ITS WORLD brings together decades of Wright's ground-breaking research, writing, and teaching into one volume that captures the excitement of the early Christians, helping readers to think like a first-century believer while reading the text responsibly for today.

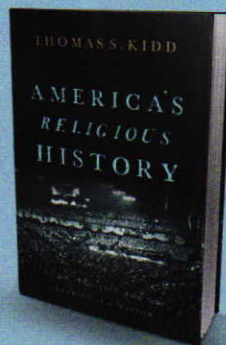


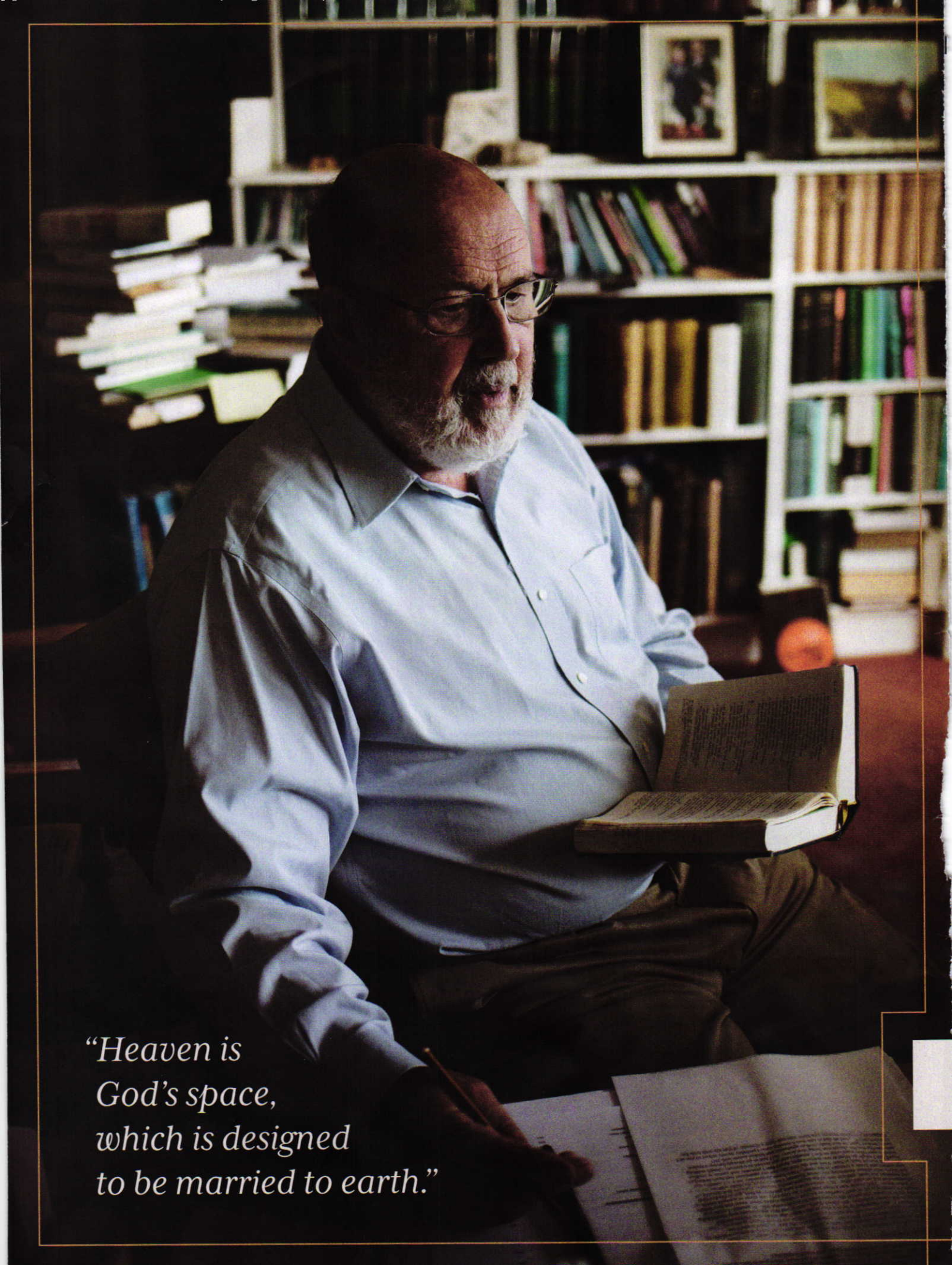
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ALSO OF NOTE

In *AMERICA'S RELIGIOUS HISTORY*, leading historian Thomas S. Kidd traces the theological and ethnic diversity and enduring strength of American religion, with special attention to Christianity and evangelical faith. Interweaving religious history and key events from the larger narrative of American history, the book considers how faith commitments and categories have shaped the nation.

This inaugural ZCINT title by Nijay K. Gupta offers a volume-length engagement with subjects that normally only receive short treatments in biblical commentaries or New Testament introductions. Looking at *1 AND 2 THESSALONIANS*, it addresses authorship, date, audience, socio-historical context, textual history, Greek style, structure, argument, and many more critical issues.



A photograph of a middle-aged man with a grey beard and glasses, wearing a light blue button-down shirt. He is sitting in a chair, reading an open book. The background is a bookshelf filled with books and some framed pictures. The lighting is warm and focused on the man.

*“Heaven is
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The doctrine of forgiveness and of reconciliation and of the blood of Jesus cleansing us, and so on, is not tidying us up so that our souls can go to heaven, but tidying us up so that the living God can come and dwell in our midst. ... This is stuff that I've been banging on about for quite some time. And the more I study different bits of the Bible, not least the whole theology of the temple, the more sense it makes and the more I see different bits of the Bible just rushing together and saying, "Yes. Why did it take you so long to catch up?"

BSM: You mentioned the importance of reading Scripture with a first-century worldview. How does understanding history sharpen our understanding of the New Testament?

WRIGHT: I think it's massive. I'll give you one obvious example. Most Christians that I know, including many theological students, have never even heard of the **revolt of Bar Kokhba** in AD 132 to 135. In 132, Simon ben Kosevah declares that he is the messiah. Rabbi Akiva hails him as "son of the star"—"Bar Kokhba." And for three years, he has a kingdom-of-God movement, running a little independent Jewish state, being quite fierce about it, and with the aim of retaking Jerusalem from the Romans—rebuilding the temple so that God will come back and dwell there and all the ancient promises will be fulfilled.

So what we have there is a three-year kingdom-of-God movement. Does that sound familiar? For most people, "Oh, yes, that's what we have in the Gospels—Jesus going around announcing that it's time for God to become king." And at a stroke, you can see that the old debates about whether the kingdom is fully inaugurated or realized or partially realized—these are straightforward. There isn't a problem. When Bar Kokhba says, "I am the messiah," and Akiva says, "he is the messiah," then this means that the kingdom of God has begun. They mint coins with the year "1" on them; you don't do that unless something has actually begun. But if you'd said, "Oh, so we can sit down and relax under our vines and our fig trees," they would say, "No, absolutely not. We've got a battle to fight, and we've got to rebuild the temple."

And so the idea of something being

inaugurated but not yet completed, once you see it in first-century Jewish terms—or, in that case, second-century Jewish terms—it makes all the sense in the world. And you can go back to Jesus with that and say, "Now, let's think about what it means to raise the flag, to say the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand," and then to say, "Now we're going to go up to the city, and we've got a job to do, and it concerns the temple and a different kind of battle."

That (Bar Kokhba), for me, is a classic example. And it's such a shame that most Christians, including most theological students, have simply never heard of that.

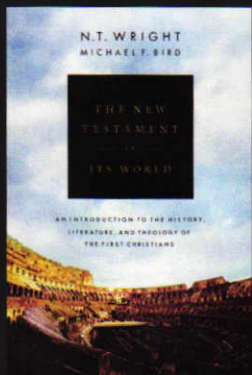
BSM: For a lot of people, what you're describing raises questions about the afterlife. What are the popular misconceptions of afterlife today, and where are they totally wrong?

WRIGHT: The first popular misconception is that the afterlife is a one-step journey from this life into a place called heaven, which is the end of it all and that's the goal. That is completely not what the New Testament says. And the New Testament never refers to the place where we go after this life as heaven.

Heaven is God's space, which is designed to be married to earth at the end. We go to be with Jesus. You can say that's heaven, if you like, though the New Testament doesn't say that. The closest it gets is in Luke 23, when Jesus says to the dying brigand, "Today, you will be with me in paradise," but that isn't the end of the journey—because, as we know, three days later, Jesus is back, he's raised from the dead, he is no longer in the paradise wherever the brigand is with him. And so we need to get used to the fact that, in the New Testament, the afterlife is a two-stage journey—life after life after death.

The New Testament is not very interested in where people are immediately after they die. We are *very* interested in that. Every time I take

The Bar Kokhba revolt (AD 132–35) was based in the Judean hills south of Jerusalem. There is little evidence the rebels succeeded in reclaiming the city from the Romans. For more on this event, see "Bar Kokhba" in *Lexham Bible Dictionary*.



Explore the first century on video

In *The New Testament in its World*, N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird explore the New Testament in the historical and cultural context of the first

century. To supplement the book and help people better understand the ancient world, they created a companion video series, and Wright offers online courses. Here's what Wright had to say about these resources:

"We've recorded quite a lot of footage of ourselves in Galilee and Jerusalem, and then in Greece in Athens, in Corinth, and then in Rome. And so there are two scholars—one Australian, one British—standing there on the Areopagus, just talking about what on earth Paul was doing there, or standing by the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem talking about Jesus' agenda and why he said what he said about the temple. And my hope is that this will stimulate and challenge students both to understand the geography and topography and so on for themselves—but again, to start thinking in terms of the first century and how it all worked.

"So this, I hope, will be a really exciting project for a whole generation. ... I hope it will bring it all alive for them. And obviously, my own longer writings stand behind the book, and I would hope that when people work through the book, it will send them back to those longer writings. But I hope it will build bridges to get the historical knowledge of Scripture and its original meaning into people's imaginations. ...

"In parallel with this, I have been recording online courses over the last five years, and I'm doing some more fairly soon. And there are, I think, 15 to 20 courses with study guides. We already have over 40,000 students from over 170 countries, and I am just gobsmacked at that. It's beyond my imagination—and that's just in five years. I see this as all part of the package of what I've been trying to do—namely, to get people to understand the Bible for all its worth."

To order *The New Testament in its World* and the companion videos, visit NewTestamentWorld.com.

To explore N.T. Wright's online course offerings, visit NTWrightOnline.org.

a funeral, somebody will say, "What I want to know is, 'Where are they now?'" That's a perfectly natural question. The New Testament says very little about that. In John 14, you have a little bit of Jesus talking about, "I will take you to be with myself." Luke 23 I've already cited.

In Philippians 1, Paul says, "My desire is to depart and be with the Messiah, which is far better." But then this is always followed by resurrection, and what you have at the end of Revelation is resurrection and new creation and new heavens and new earth. And most Western Christians have not even begun to think about that, let alone to figure out how it all fits together. That's why I wrote my book *Surprised by Hope*, to try to clarify all that. ... A friend of mine said, "Heaven is important, but it's not the end of the world." And that's the thing people just find it difficult to get their minds around.

BSM: You like to use the phrase "the victory of God." What do you mean by that, and how does it relate to the kingdom of God?

WRIGHT: When Jesus announces that it's time for God to become king, which is what his basic proclamation is, then many people today say, "Well, isn't God always king?" And the answer—and you see this in the Old Testament, in the intertestamental period, and certainly in the New Testament—is that, no, this world has been invaded and taken over by hostile forces, whether we call them the Satan or the devil or whatever. The New Testament doesn't have a very precise language about this, but it is clear that there are dark forces—which include forces that influence what we call political forces, that stand behind them and go deeper than that.

And as we look back at the 20th century, we oughtn't to be surprised by this, because we saw this in the 20th century all over the place. And in a way, we maybe are still seeing it now. But there are forces which are superhuman, which go beyond the sum total of ordinary human wickedness. And these forces gather themselves together, and in the New Testament, they are condemned on the cross of Jesus. That is the victory.

So when Jesus says, "Now, the ruler of this world is cast out and if I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself" (John 12:31-32), what he's saying is, there is this strange, dark being called the ruler of this world—call him the Satan or whatever you like—and he is going to be overthrown. He is going to be defeated. And that's why the nations of the world can now come to join the people of God. That's why there is a gentile mission—because the dark force that has

*“The Sermon on the Mount
is the marching orders
for the kingdom people.”*

held the world captive has been defeated.

Now, as you find in the book of Revelation, the defeat is not just one-off—as though now it's all done, and we sit back. The decisive victory has been won, but that victory then has to be implemented. And you see that going on in Revelation, you see it going on in 1 Peter, you see it going on in a book like Colossians, where the idea is that the victory was won by the suffering and death of Jesus. And that victory is then implemented by the witness—often, not always, the suffering witness of Jesus' followers, and sometimes even their martyrdom.

But the dark powers don't give up easily. Paul discovered this when he faced terrible things in Ephesus, as he says in 2 Corinthians 1. The victory over the dark powers was won when Sin, with a capital “S,” was condemned on the cross of Jesus the Messiah. That's what Paul says in Romans 8:1–4. So the victory

of God is what Jesus accomplished on the cross—as a result of which the kingdom is truly inaugurated, and now has to be implemented.

This is why Jesus on the cross—and all four Gospels tell us this; they underline it—Jesus is labeled as the “King of the Jews.” Because in the Old Testament, the king—the true king—is the one who is going to win the victory over the powers of evil, so that God's people may be freed and God's world may be put right. That's what the victory of God is all about.

BSM: So for Christians today, we can participate in the victory of God by the way that

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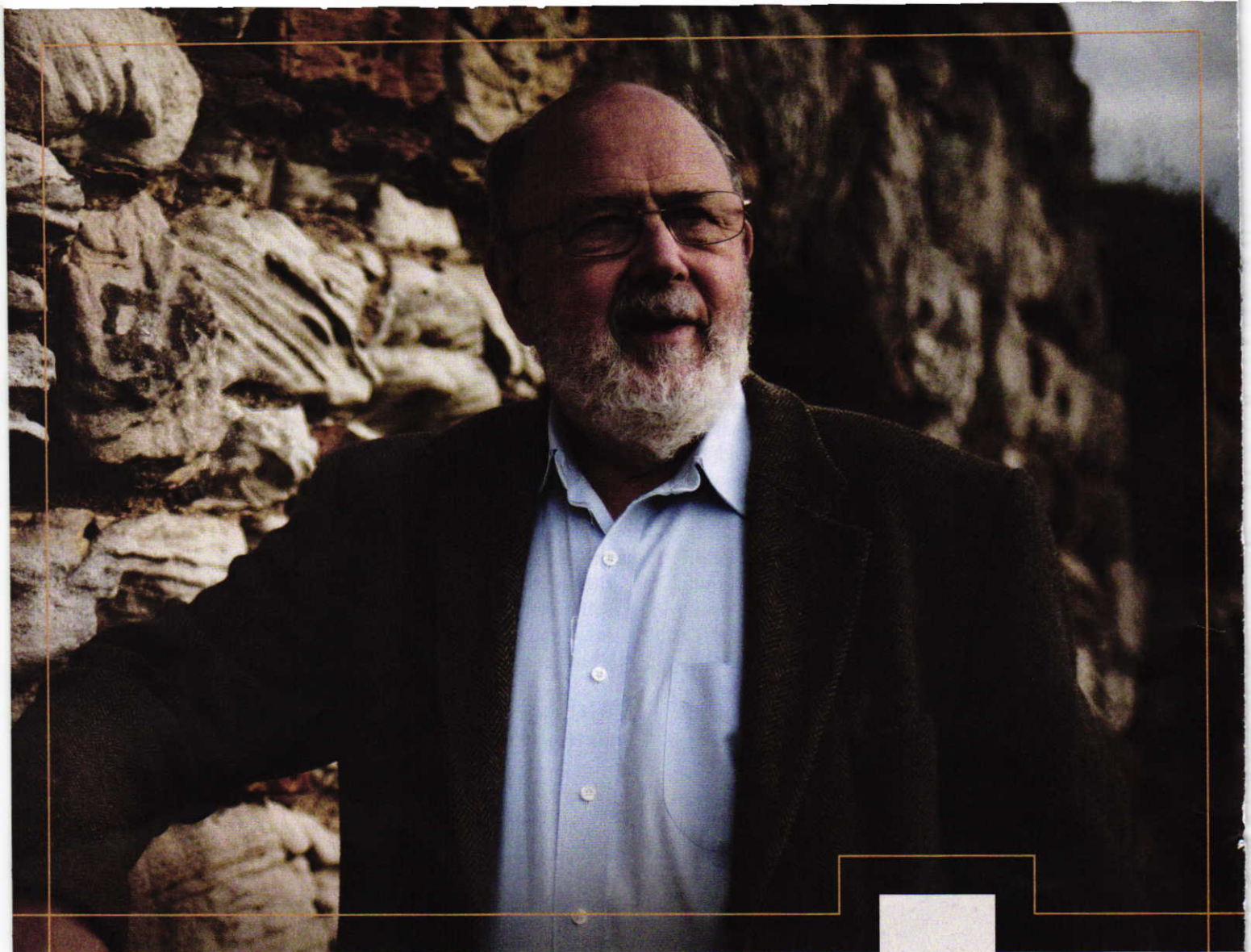
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we live, the way that we love, the way that we share the gospel, the way that we even perhaps give our lives for the kingdom.

WRIGHT: Yes. I would always say there's going to be more than that, but I would start with the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is not a sort of general abstract Christian ethic. It's the marching orders, if you like, for the kingdom people. This is how the victory is won. Take the **Beatitudes**: "blessed are the peacemakers ... blessed are the people who are hungry for justice ... blessed are the pure in heart ... blessed are the merciful." This is how the victory is won—not by

God sending in the tanks, but by God sending the meek and the merciful and the hungry-for-justice people and the peacemakers, and so on.

And by the time the dark forces and the bullies and the bad guys realize what's going on, the meek and the merciful and the hungry-for-justice people have built schools and orphanages and hospitals and are going around caring for the poor and the disadvantaged, and they're reminding the rulers of the world that their primary job is to look after the weak. In other words, the Psalm 72 agenda, if you like. And the church in the modern Western world has so much forgotten this agenda, this world-changing agenda, that it treats the Sermon on the Mount simply as a personal pietistic ethic, which it never, ever was. This is revolutionary stuff. **B+**

The **Beatitudes** are found in Matthew 5:3-11, the opening passage of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. See page 28.