

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Simply Jesus

by

N. T. Wright

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1:

A VERY ODD SORT OF KING

1. According to N. T. Wright, all Christians must come to terms with “who Jesus actually was: what he did, what he said, and what he meant.” He calls this “the question that any grown-up Christian faith must address” (3). Why do so many Christians ignore this question or hesitate to explore it? Why is it important for Christians to ask (and then answer) this question? How would you describe in a couple of sentences who Jesus was, what he taught, and what he accomplished?

2. Wright goes on to argue that churches can be part of the problem: “We have reduced the kingdom of God to private piety, the victory of the cross to comfort for the conscience, and Easter itself to a happy, escapist ending after a sad, dark tale” (5). Do you agree with Wright’s charge and about the need for a “new Vision” about Jesus? What is your experience with how the church frames how we perceive Jesus?

CHAPTER 2: THE THREE PUZZLES

1. Wright introduces the idea that, for Jesus, both the political and the personal dimensions were parts of what Jesus considered “religious.” In what ways do you think Jesus was political? What do you think of Wright’s point, and how might this play out today in our world?

CHAPTER 3: THE PERFECT STORM

1. In what ways is studying about Jesus like a perfect storm (i.e., the convergence of forces from different directions that dramatically increases the strength of a storm)?
2. Take a close look at the two Jesus myths described on pages 17 and 18: the Western Christian myth and the new classic modernist myth. Most of the public discussion about Jesus is between those who believe in one myth or the other, reducing the conversation to a yes or

no answer to the question “Did it all happen or didn’t it?” Why does Western culture make the conversation about Jesus so black and white? How does this mode of thinking reduce and/or distort who Jesus was and what he came to do?

3. Why is it so important to place the gospels and Jesus in the correct context? Why do so many Christians and Christian leaders fail to do so? What can we do to stop ourselves from repeating “the age-old mistake of imagining Jesus in our own image” (21)?

CHAPTER 4: THE MAKING OF A FIRST-CENTURY STORM

1. How are the “Roman storm” and the “Jewish storm” similar? In what ways are they different? The struggle between the Jews and an oppressive government had been going on for centuries, and as Wright says, “The long story of Israel must finally confront the long story of Rome” (35). What does Wright mean by this? What is it about the Roman Empire that sets up Jesus’s arrival?
2. In this chapter, Wright begins to tie in Old Testament stories to Jesus of Nazareth, e.g., the Exodus, Babylon, King David, and so forth, claiming that they are integral parts of Jesus’s story. Is your view of the Bible as a whole starting to shift in these beginning chapters of *Simply Jesus*? Why is the Exodus the underlying thread that ties it all together? Give specific examples. How do you see other Old Testament stories relating to Jesus’s story?

CHAPTER 5: THE HURRICANE

1. “Again and again in the past, the way Israel had told its own story was different from the way God was planning things. The people, no doubt, hoped that the way they were telling their own story would fit in comfortably enough with the way God was seeing things” (37). How are twenty-first-century Christians hoping their own stories fit with the way God is working in their lives? Where in your own life have you seen God act against the narrative you’ve created for him?
2. Many Bible passages describe what it will look like when God becomes king. Wright includes some of them in this chapter. Of the ones he includes, which images strike you as the most significant or meaningful? How might these images have steered the people of Israel’s expectations of how God’s final rule would come about, particularly those expectations that were very different from what actually happened (i.e., God acting through Jesus)?
3. In part I, Wright shows us the components of the perfect storm of Jesus’s time: the power of Rome, Israel’s history as God’s chosen people, and the promise of God’s becoming king. Any of these components on their own could arguably be enough to make Jesus’s arrival on earth appropriate, but why did God time it to the convergence of these three things? How does this historical context enrich your understanding of who Jesus was and what he did?

PART TWO

CHAPTER 6: GOD'S IN CHARGE NOW

1. When Jesus began his public ministry, he announced that God was now in charge. Wright compares it to when a sports club announces a new coach after a period of poor management. The effect is, “Everything’s going to change now! This is an *announcement* about something that’s *happened* because of which everything will be different. . . . Once the new coach has been announced, the players had better do what he says. Then, and only then, things will work out properly” (60). How does this analogy change your perspective on Jesus’s role as a leader, a king? Does it add to or take away from how you look at him? How so?

CHAPTER 7: THE CAMPAIGN STARTS HERE

1. When Jesus announced that God was in charge, he was, in effect, starting the campaign for God’s becoming king. Rather than ushering in God’s kingdom through violence and battles, Jesus did so through healings and celebrations. How did these healings and celebrations bring heaven and earth together? What is the link between healing and God’s rule? How is this way of ruling more effective than a violent revolution?

2. Just like we need to understand the story of Exodus to fully understand God's rescuing his people, so we also need to understand the Babylonian exile and the role forgiveness plays there. As Wright explains, "Exile was seen, throughout the ancient scriptures, as the punishment for Israel's sin. . . . But if that is so, then forgiveness must mean that exile is now over" and that "forgiveness is part of the overall message that Israel's God is in fact king" (73). Taking this into account, what did it mean for Jesus to announce forgiveness during his ministry? Is this an unexpected use of forgiveness? How does it deepen how we understand forgiveness today?
3. At the end of the chapter, on page 85, Wright summarizes Jesus's campaign. Do Jesus's boldness and methods change your perspective on who he was as a historical figure? As a religious figure? Is this Jesus relevant to the twenty-first century?

CHAPTER 8: STORIES THAT EXPLAIN AND A MESSAGE THAT TRANSFORMS

1. Wright asserts that "Jesus's parables . . . tell us in their form alone, but also in their repeated and increasingly direct content, that the purposes of heaven are indeed coming true on earth, but that the people who in theory have been longing for that to happen are turning their backs on it now that it is actually knocking on their door" (96). Why is it that the "wrong" people in

the Bible seemed to understand the message from Jesus's parables while many of the "right" people missed it? What was blocking their vision, so to speak? Do Christians today have a similar problem? What might prevent us from seeing Jesus's true message, and how can we be sure to *get* the message?

2. Jesus teaches that when God becomes king, hearts will be transformed. Why is this an integral part of God's rule on earth? Why can't God's rule come into full fruition without this transformation of lives from the inside out?

CHAPTER 9: THE KINGDOM PRESENT AND FUTURE

1. In this chapter, Wright discusses how the kingdom can be both present and future. How do the four men he profiles help explain this tension?
2. On page 116, Wright mentions two points about would-be royal movements that help clarify various things about Jesus's public career. Based on these points, how is Jesus similar to the four men profiled earlier in the chapter? Do these similarities add to or take away from his campaign? Wright says, "As with everything Jesus did, it seems that he quite deliberately remodeled first-century Jewish expectations around himself" (117). Why did Jesus do this? How does he break away from this royal-movement paradigm (i.e., how does he stand out from the other four men)?

CHAPTER 10: BATTLE AND TEMPLE

1. Wright says, “The line between good and evil is clear at the level of God, on the one hand, and the Satan, on the other. It is much, much less clear as it passes through human beings, individually and collectively” (123). What is the benefit of having a perspective on evil in the world that doesn’t boil down to an “us versus them” mentality? What do we gain when we look at the struggle between good and evil in a more realistic, albeit more complex, way? How do you see good and evil differently after reading this chapter?

CHAPTER 11: SPACE, TIME, AND MATTER

1. Many people are familiar with Jesus as God incarnate, but what does Wright mean when he says the Temple is an “incarnational” symbol and that Jesus behaved as if he were the Temple, in person (133)? What does it mean to think of a place as an “incarnation”?
2. This chapter discusses how interconnected heaven and earth are. How does Wright’s explanation of space, time, and matter challenge our modern, twenty-first-century view of heaven and earth? What effect does it have on your faith, knowing that Jesus didn’t come to earth just to teach people how to get to heaven, but rather to bring heaven to earth?

CHAPTER 12: AT THE HEART OF THE STORM

1. Looking at the passages Wright points out in Isaiah, Daniel, and Zechariah, what does each predict about Jesus and his vocation? How does Jesus fulfill these prophecies? How does this fulfillment go against how the people of Israel believed God was going to redeem them? If the hope of Israel is only one piece of the puzzle of discovering who Jesus is, why do you think Wright calls this chapter “At the Heart of the Storm”?

CHAPTER 13: WHY DID THE MESSIAH HAVE TO DIE?

1. How are God’s judgment and Jesus’s sacrifice on the cross related? Why couldn’t Jesus “establish the new creation without allowing the poison in the old to have its full effect” (179)?
2. Isaiah 53 talks about how the “servant of YHWH” will rescue Israel through his own suffering (154). However, “Jews who had studied Isaiah 53 had thought of the servant *either* as a suffering figure, but not a messiah, *or* as a messiah, but not a suffering one” (171). Why was the idea that God would come to reign through the suffering of the servant (i.e., the idea that the Messiah *was* the servant) so surprising to the Jews? Why couldn’t Jesus’s vocation be lived out through the messianic model that first-century Jews had come to believe in?

CHAPTER 14:
UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT:
EASTER AND BEYOND

1. If Jesus, after his resurrection, is the prototype of the new creation, what does it mean for us to follow him and be more like him?
2. How does Wright's interpretation of Jesus's resurrection, ascension, and the Second Coming expand Christianity beyond a private spirituality? Why is Wright so against reducing Christianity to a way of being religious? Understanding this new perspective, how might we share our faith with others?

CHAPTER 15:
JESUS: THE RULER OF THE WORLD

1. At the beginning of this chapter, Wright explains four positions people can take as they face the question of what it looks like for Jesus to be ruling the world today. How does Wright propose we address these positions? Which position do you most closely identify with? Has your view changed at all after reading *Simply Jesus*? How so?
2. Why is it important that God's rule comes through human beings? Why does God choose to do it this way? What does this method tell you about God's character? Also, if the Holy Spirit equips Jesus's followers "so that they become as it were an extension of that new Temple" (215), what does it mean for Christians to

be an extension of the Temple? How does this change a Christian's role in establishing God's kingdom and rule on earth?

3. What challenges does Wright present to the church and its followers in this chapter and in the book as a whole? What is your response to these challenges? Are you inspired? Overwhelmed? Convicted? Has there been anything in these pages that has shifted your understanding or encouraged you to practice your faith in different ways?