

Simply Christian  
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### **Course outline, book and other materials**

[Simply Christian](#) by N. T. Wright  
Also recommend [Simply Jesus](#).

## **Gathering, Prayer**

### **Introduction**

Last week we talked about 4 “echoes of a voice” that are universal human emotions.

1. A sense of justice.
2. Spirituality
3. A longing for relationship
4. Yearning for beauty

Your homework from last week was to pay attention for those echoes of a voice. Anybody want to share an example?

Today is chapters 5 and 6 in the book. In an hour, we are going to cover God and Israel. That is a BHAG, if ever there was one. So, let’s dive in.

#### **Chapter 5: God**

The echoes do not point directly to any god, let alone the Christian God. Rather, they are bit like a sound in the foggy mist coming from some indeterminate direction. Where is that sound coming from?

Changing metaphors, the echoes lead us down a path towards the center of a maze, but we never quite get to the end. These are not a proof of God exists. We first have to think about what the meaning of the word “God” is.

What is your image of God? Any attempt to capture God is doomed to being insufficient. Speaking of God in anything like the Christian sense is a bit like staring into the sun. It’s dazzling—in fact it is impossible. It is easier to look away from the sun itself and to enjoy the fact that sun allows us to see everything else clearly.

Part of the problem lies in that the word has multiple meanings. If you ask someone, "do you believe in God?" in this country, it will probably be interpreted to mean something like, "do you believe in the one God of the Judeo-Christian tradition." That is of course quite a different question than, "Do you believe in a god?"

No matter how hard we try, how many theologians we turn loose on the problem, we will not, we cannot grasp God in totality. We can't pin him down and inspect him. There is a bit of analogy with quantum physics here. Quantum particles can have multiple states that exist simultaneously. Only when you interrogate (measure) the state is it determined.

Now, we, as Christians, believe that God was indeed pinned down and tortured and killed. We will get to that in due time.

Since we believe that God exists, just where is He? **<Pause and ask people what they think.>** Ecclesiastes 5:2 says, "Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few." This common biblical tradition insists that if God is "living" anywhere, that place is known as heaven. Two things need to be made clear. **<show slide>**

1. The biblical authors did not think they could travel to another place and find God's abode. Heaven to them meant God's space as opposed to our space, not God's location within our space-time universe. The question for them was if those two spaces intersected, and if so how, where, and when they intersected.
2. Heaven is often used to mean the "place where God's people will be with him, in blissful happiness, after they die." But, in the earliest traditions, the phrase "going to heaven" is equivalent to going to be with God in the place where he's been all along. Heaven is not a future reality, but a present one. The same question arises—how does this place interact, if at all, with our world?

So, think of earth as our space and heaven as God's space. Psalm 115:16 says, "The heavens are the LORD'S heavens, but the earth he has given to human beings."

So how do heaven and earth, God's space and our space, relate to one another. There are 3 basic ways to think about this.

1. God's space and our space are essentially the same—two ways of talking about the same thing. God is everywhere, and everywhere is God. Or, God is everything and everything is God. This is pantheism, a response to the polytheism of the Greeks and Romans. Rather than keep track of all the gods and what they were for, it was easier to assume

that “the divine”, whatever that is, permeates everything. Now this is tough work—you have to imagine that mosquitoes have the divine in them. Harder yet, cancer cells and tsunamis. This is the problem—pantheism cannot cope with evil. If God is everywhere and in everything, how can evil exist?

2. The two space are distinctly separate and far apart. The gods, if they exist are in their heaven, have a good time, and not involved in earth. This was a popular philosophy in the Jesus’ time. This philosophy became popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the Deism movement. This movement separated earth and heaven (if it exists at till) and makes God someone who doesn’t care about what happens on earth. When you hear people say they believe in God, but don’t go to church and don’t think about God very much, they are likely Deists. And, it is hard to blame them. If you believed in a distant, remote God who didn’t care about the fate of the earth, would you get of bed on a Sunday morning to go to church?
3. Option 3 is the classic Jewish and Christian view. Heaven and earth are not coterminous. Nor are they separated by a huge gulf. They overlap and intersect in a number of different ways. This is complicated compared to the black and white views of pantheism or deism. As we talked about last week, why would we expect this to be simple. In fact, it should be complex. In the OT, clearly God is in heaven (his space) and we are on earth (our space). Yet, repeatedly, the two spaces overlap. God makes his presence known and his voice heard in our space. What are some examples of where God makes his presence known in the OT?
  - Abraham meets God over and over
  - Jacob sees a ladder between heaven and earth.
  - Moses sees the burning bush
  - God uses a pillar of cloud to lead the Israelites.
  - And on and on

The main place where the heaven and earth overlapped was the temple in Jerusalem. Psalm 132:13-14 says, <sup>13</sup>“For the LORD has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his habitation: <sup>14</sup>“This is my resting place forever; here I will reside, for I have desired it.” The temple was the focus of their worship; they believed that heaven and earth overlapped in the temple.

Thinking of heaven and earth this way makes the main Christian affirmations make sense. Thinking of them in the paradigm of the first 2 options makes them puzzling and confusing. Think about “your will be done, on earth as in heaven.”

### **The Name of God.**

<What are the names of God used in the Bible? Show slide.>

Somewhere along the way the Israelites came to know their God by a special name. By the time of Jesus and probably much earlier than that, Jews were not allowed to say the name of God out loud. (except once a year the High Priest would pronounce God's name in the Holy of Holies in the temple).

We know the consonants of the name—YHWH, generally pronounce Yahweh. The meaning is something like "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be". This suggest that God can't be defined in terms of anyone of anything else. God is who he is; he is his own category, not part of the larger one. Hence, we can't really get to him via our other categories.

Because the Jews couldn't speak or write his name, they would substitute other names. Often they used ADONAI (my Lord) Sometimes they would write the consonants for YHWH with the vowels of ADNONAI. This end up being Jehovah. Most current versions of the OT maintain this practice of not using God's personal name. So, it is usually translated as "the Lord". This is confusing, but is important to get our minds around it.

Jesus was, from very early on, referred to as "the Lord". This carried at least 3 meanings

1. The master, that is the one whose servants we are.
2. The true Lord, as opposed to Caesar who also claimed the title Lord.
3. The LORD, that is YHWH.

You will see all three meanings in the writing of Paul. In our culture, probably due to the influence of deism, the phrase "the Lord" is a way of referring to a distant generalized deity—a fuzzy deity at best. We miss the meaning of what a first century Jew would understand when think of YHWH or an early Christian when thinking about Jesus. So when you see the phrase "my Lord" translate it to the one true God.

## **Chapter 6: Israel**

So, why talk about Israel? No early Christian would have thought about Israel in a dismissive way. <Show slide.> "It is fundamental to the Christian worldview in its truest form that what happened to Jesus of Nazareth was the very climax of the long story of Israel."

Talking about Israel is not a simple task. It is hard to discuss without getting our modern knowledge and sensibilities mixed up in the conversation. And, it is hard to know exactly what happened. So, Wright chooses to tell the story as the Jews of Jesus' day might have told it. This is on solid ground. The OT

(in both Hebrew and Greek) is a solid source. And, there are histories written about the time of Jesus that recall the time before Jesus.

Genesis 11 is the story of the Tower of Babel. Already in the first 10 chapters, the fall has happened, murder has been committed, there is widespread evil resulting in a flood, and after Noah steps off the boat, he gets blitzed. Now the people think they can build a tower to heaven. Here is God's response: <sup>6</sup>And the LORD said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. <sup>7</sup>Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." Now, in the spirit of the Beautiful Outlaw and the "playful Jesus", I like Wright's translation: "Oh, so you've built a tower have you? Whatever will you think of next?"

"The story of the Tower of Babel is an account of a world given to injustice, spurious types of spirituality (trying to stretch up to heaven by our own efforts), failed relationships, and the creation of building whose urban ugliness speaks of human pride rather than the nurturing of beauty." What does this remind you of?

It is the very next Chapter where God call Abram and makes spectacular promises to him.

<sup>2</sup>I'll make you a great nation  
and bless you.  
I'll make you famous;  
you'll be a blessing.  
<sup>3</sup>I'll bless those who bless you;  
those who curse you I'll curse.  
All the families of the Earth  
will be blessed through you."

Note that last sentence—all of the families of the earth will be blessed. Somehow, Abraham and his descendants will be the means by which God puts things to rights.

You know the story. God makes a covenant with Abraham. Not a contract—it is not an equal arrangement. God is in control of the deal. There are lots of ways to think about it, but the point is that God's covenant with Abraham is a rock solid commitment on the part of the world's Creator that he will be the God of Abraham and his family and through Abraham and his family, God will bless the entire world. That last phrase is key—the entire world.

The covenant might have been rock solid on God's part, but as we know Abraham did not act as if it were on his part. The problems start immediately. The theme of the story of Israel repeated over and over is one of going away and coming back, slavery and exodus, exile and restoration. This is the story that Jesus consciously told in his words, his actions, and supremely in his death and resurrection.

The OT was probably reached their final form when the Jews were in exile in Babylon. So, the theme of exile and restoration was a natural for them. This pattern repeats itself over and over again in the OT. Just think of the Sunday School lessons from the past.

And, even though the Jews are finally returned to Israel and allowed to rebuild the temple (see Ezra), it wasn't the same as in the time of David and Solomon. They were slaves in their own land, subject to Persia, Egypt, Greece, Syria, and in Jesus' time Rome. The Jews must have wondered if this is really what it is all about? Israelite poets and prophets had declared that their God would become king of the world. This is emphasized in the book of Daniel—when God's people are finally rescued and oppressive pagans are overthrown and Israel is free at last that will be the time when the true God will fulfill all his promises, judge the whole world, and make everything right. God's kingdom will have begun.

There are 4 themes that are consistent in the story of Israel as it is told in the OT. These themes will be important as we begin to talk about Jesus and his mission on the earth.

1. The king. God made spectacular promises to David—his royal house would continue forever. To the exiled Jews, it must have seen that this promise was not fulfilled. Psalm 89 tackles this issue head on. Verses 189-37 recalls the promises God made to David. But, verses 38-51 asks the tough questions about the seeming breaking of the promise. Still, throughout the entire OT, there is a clear belief that there will be a true king, a king who will set everything right.
2. The temple. As we discussed, the Jews believed that the temple was where heaven and earth met. But, the temple had an up and down history. And in Jesus' time, it was the Roman ruler who was restoring the temple. The *true king* would reestablish the place where heaven and earth intersect.
3. The Torah, the Law of Moses. The Torah was how you were supposed to behave after you were freed from slavery, not to curry God's favor, but to show your gratitude, loyalty, and determination to live in God's will. The Torah was never intended as a charter for individuals. IT was given to a people, and it was a way of keeping the nation together, of promoting their identity as a people of God.

4. New creation. Daniel and Isaiah both speak of a new creation. Their vision of the new creation is an incredible world, one we can hardly imagine. <read the quote on page 83 if there is time.> The theme of Isaiah is the renewal of the entire cosmos, heaven and earth together and in this new creation, all will be well

So, how will this new creation about? Only through one final shocking exile and restoration. The true king turns into a servant, God's servant who must act out the fate of Israel, must be Israel on behalf of the Israel that can no longer be obedient to its vocation.

This is wonderful dream. It would make a great movie. But why suppose it is really true. That is what the NT is all about, and it focuses, of course, on Jesus.

Stay tuned as they used to say. Next week chapters 7 and 8.

End in prayer.